

Ben 0:05

Good afternoon. My name is Ben Verinder. I'm here hosting the CIPR Engage podcast. And today we're talking about the biases in organizational decision making and what to do about that. Let's start with some introductions. With me, I've got Shoni Lynn. Shoni, can you introduce yourself?

Shayoni 0:26

Of course. Hi, Ben. Hello, everyone. Lovely to be here. My name is Shauni Lin. I am CEO and founder of a behavioural science communications advisory called Lin. I'm also a CIPR and PRCA fellow and I sit on the PRCA PR board and together with Ben and our other guest, John, we founded CIPR's Behavioural Insights panel.

Ben 0:50

Which brings us neatly onto John White. Uh, Dr. John, um, can you introduce yourself, please?

Jon 0:55

Hi, good afternoon, Ben, and good afternoon, Shionni. Thank you very much for the invitation to join you, uh, today. I'm, uh, an independent practitioner of long standing. I've been in public relations practice for more years, almost, than I would prefer to, uh, uh, be precise about, but I have worked in government communications, I've been a full time academic and I've worked independently for about 30 years, linked to CIPR in a number of ways, as Shionni just mentioned, the Behavioural Insights interest group that we've been involved in, trying to raise interest in the application of behavioural science to public relations practice. And I'm a psychologist by background. So I, I studied psychology at several levels to doctorate level, and part of the reason I'm here this afternoon is because I studied decision making in public relations practice and the contribution public relations makes to decision making quite extensively for my doctoral work. And I'll hope to draw on that in the discussion we have this afternoon.

Ben 2:05

I can't think of two people I'd rather talk to about this particular subject. And I'm Ben Verinder. I'm the Managing Director of Chalkstream, which is a specialist reputation research company. But as an individual consultant and practitioner, I've got a longstanding interest in the application of behavioural science in public relations. And it was actually the subject of my thesis that I wrote for my chartered paper, my charter status paper back in the day when you had to write a paper and be examined on it. And it's published in a book called Leading Practitioners or Expert Practitioners, I should say, that essay. And I've really, alongside my two guests today, really just very interested in the benefits of understanding behavioural science and psychology more broadly in public relations practice. So let's let's start with some definitions. Let's assume that our audience has a wide range of different experiences and different knowledge in relation to behavioural science. Let's start with the key question. What's a bias? What's a bias, guys?

Jon 3:16

Bias is basically a deviation from rational thinking when it comes to decision-making. So it may be based on past experience. It may be based on emotion. It may be based on misconceptions, faulty assumptions. But it's a real problem in decision-making to root out

these difficulties for decision-making. So it's basically though a deviation from rational decision-making. So it's a real problem in decision-making.

Ben 3:44

Thanks John.

Shayoni 3:46

itself before we understand biases. So, um, you know, what is the role of heuristics in judgment and decision-making. And I think, you know, I'm sure our listeners are aware of system one and system two thinking, which is our automatic decision-making versus our more rational, more decision-making decision-making. But we need to understand how complex decision-making is and how many hundreds of decisions we are making every day in our personal and our professional lives. And the fact that we don't have the mental capacity to think deeply about every single more considered decision making. But we need to understand how complex decision making is, and how many hundreds of decisions we're making every day

Jon 4:16

So it's a real problem in decision-making.

Shayoni 4:16

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Jon 4:16

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Shayoni 4:17

personal and our professional lives. And the fact that we don't have the mental capacity to think deeply about every single decision. So we do rely on these limited number of mental shortcuts, which lead to the deviations that John talked about, which are often predictable. And, you know, I think it's also important to note that biases are systematic, and they do not necessarily correlate with intelligence or cognitive ability. So instead, they arise from a variety of sources, such as societal or cultural influences. John's mentioned a few other things. So we really need to understand that biases are baked into our systems. And when we as practitioners think about how we communicate within organizations, we need to better understand and appreciate how these operate within us as human beings, before we are able to interpret that and implement that within our organizational setting.

Ben 5:16

So there's a couple of things I just want to unpack there in relation to what you mentioned certainly. So heuristics, just so everybody understands, these are these rules of thumb, these application of what's called system one thinking, this fast thinking that we engage in because essentially we don't have the energy to undertake slow, more rational decisions across every decision that we make during the day. Is that correct?

Shayoni 5:44

That's exactly it. That's exactly it. And I think, you know, we need to understand that these rules of thumb have a place in our lives. you know, it's been developed over millennia, and

they do help us in making decisions. And an automatic decision is perfectly the appropriate way to go about our normal lives. But I think what we need to understand is that is the complexity of decision making. So these rules of thumb, these heuristics or mental shortcuts, they reduce the mental pressure on us to perform complex what you know, whether it's assessing probabilities or predicting values, and it just makes judgment a bit more simpler. So whilst they're useful, they do lead to systematic, predictable errors, and sometimes these can be severe. And today, when we talk about how these affect organizational decision making, they can also become systemic. And so I think this is really important to understand. So.

Ben 6:43

So we've set our stall out in relation to what is bias and what is a decision and how we make decisions. And of course, we're focusing today on organizational decision making. So to add to Choney and John's points is that these are not necessarily individual errors or mistakes that we can make. So we can make them in a collective einen so we can make. So we can make organizational errors. So can you can either of you give me some examples of where it's been clear that there's been some bias in organizational decision making. Have you got any examples? So we can make some examples. I'll start with John and then move on to Choney. So we can make some examples. I'll start with John and then move on to Choney.

Jon 7:23

you know, I've got a really good example. It was, given a lot of attention, actually nearly ten years ago, by the, um, this association of certified chartered accountants, when they looked at the problems of governance. But in some of the background material they prepared on that, they were talking about why did the financial crisis of the late 2000s, why did that occur? You know, why did the decision-makers who might have been able to anticipate, uh, and start to work against the consequences of that kind of crisis, why were they not able to do that? And the, again, the background documents concluded that they were, they were guilty of a kind of group think. uh, this is one, uh, you know, very prominent bias in group decision-making. Uh, they simply were thinking in traditional ways and didn't anticipate the way in which the financial, financial system could crash in the way that it did. uh, the conclusion drawn in the consultation documents was that, uh, the problem arose because the decision-making groups were drawn from similar backgrounds. They were dealing with information that they were familiar with, and they didn't think outside the limitations of that information, of the situation which meant that they failed to anticipate and deal with the consequences of the financial crisis. I mean, this is a really, uh, prominent example of failures in decision-making where you think some of the most able people in the organizations involved, you know, think how able they would be regarded as when it came to decision-making. They were unable to make good decisions. And there are very good reasons for that, which we'll, we'll come on to and, uh,

Ben 9:18

And I'll start with John and then move on to Choney. Well,

Jon 9:18

talk about it.

Ben 9:19

you're that example speaks to a very powerful, very powerful holistic, a very powerful rule of thumb, which is social norms, and that we are as social beings and we're highly influenced by the thoughts of opinions of others, particularly in certain circumstances. Now, interestingly enough, in groupthink, there are other elements at play, but I'm sure we'll come on to talk about social norms as well. Thanks, John, Choney, have you got one in your in your

Shayoni 9:45

Yeah,

Ben 9:46

in

Shayoni 9:46

I've

Ben 9:46

your pocket

Shayoni 9:46

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Ben 9:47

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Shayoni 9:47

actually.

Ben 9:47

talk OK,

Shayoni 9:47

I've got two. One

Ben 9:49

talk us through.

Shayoni 9:49

is very similar to GroupSync, but also the sunk cost effect. This is looking at Apple and how it took them 10 years to pull the plug on the very secretive initiative called Project Titan. So, Project Titan was devised in 2014 to build an autonomous electric car and at one time, it had about 5,000 employees that were working on this initiative alone. And this is really a textbook case of sunk cost.

It wasn't delivering against the investment. So, instead of looking at the payoff, right, the future outcome, they were more looking backwards, looking at the past investments or the sunk cost, which played such an influential role in how leadership viewed this particular initiative, where they should be pulling the plug. And they just kept justifying the need for this project, which resulted in, you know, consistent goal shifting. So, it started with the

development of a fully autonomous robot car. Then they moved to being like a Tesla-style RV. Then they became a driver-assist car before they finally killed the project. So, this shows how, you know, sunk cost buyers alongside things like GroupThink can affect decision-making at the very highest levels at the largest of firms. And the other example is very recent. This is a very recent study which looks at AI. So, we know organizations across the world are rapidly adopting AI into decision-making. And a very recent study published in June this year, it's an experimental study by Carter and Liu, and it explores AI and cognitive bias in performance appraisal ratings. And this was the first study that looked to just juxtapose the impact of human and AI recommendations on decision-making. And so, the authors ran two controlled experiments of 775 managers. And what they explored was how anchoring and adjustment bias affected performance appraisal ratings. So, anchoring and adjustment bias is where individuals rely on the first piece of information that they encounter, so they anchor, and this influences their decision-making and often leads to insufficient or irrational adjustments to justify the anchor. So, in this particular study, what the authors found was that managers' performance ratings were significantly impacted by the anchor set by AI in its recommendations. So, when an AI tool suggested an initial performance rating, man moved less than 5% from that anchor, even after they viewed much richer evidence. So, the result of this was accuracy fell by one-third, and women systematically received lower scores. So, the result of this was accuracy fell by one-third, and women systematically received lower scores. So,

Ben 12:52

And I mean, it brings us on to,

Shayoni 12:55

the results of this was accuracy fell by one-third,

Ben 12:55

there

Shayoni 12:55

and women systematically received lower scores.

Ben 12:56

are a number of different studies actually that are emerging in relation to artificial intelligence and bias. I'm thinking of one which harnesses likability or We have a predisposition to value information from, I can hear somebody's, I can't, I can hear background noise that's really, okay. Okay.

undertaken by the University of Zurich. And it's unfortunate because it had a variety of ethical question marks over it. In it, they were looking to understand the power of the bias of likability, liking. So, we are essentially significantly influenced by whether we like the other person, or particularly whether we think that we have something in common with the person that we're communicating with. In this case, i wasn't a person. It was an AI bot posing to be a person that infiltrated a Reddit forum, which was being set up essentially to persuade people to change their minds. It's called Change My Mind, I think. To change their minds about some really fundamentally important ethical points, such as capital punishment, corporal punishment, etc. Attitudes to abortion, this kind of things, really meaty subjects. And

essentially, the bot went crawling around this particular forum, and it approached multiple people who were debating on this forum, and it trawled through their posts and through their accounts. And it established a persona that then mirrored theirs. And therefore, essentially, it purported to be have a lot in common with everybody that it was seeking to persuade. The end results of this study were very clear that AI was far, far more likely to persuade people to change their minds about some of these fundamental subjects than a human was, because of its ability to collect at volume information to supercharge the likability bias within us. Unfortunately, unfortunately, it's an unethical study because there wasn't permission sought to the subjects involved. However, however, I think the results, you know, raise all sorts of questions and they're replicated in other studies. They raise all sorts of questions about propaganda and misinformation online in the future of the unethical application of behavioural science in communication, which we'll come on to in a bit. And I'll ask you about your views about, OK, so we've got we've got biases within us. We've got biases that are expressed at an organizational level. We've got biases that are expressed at an organizational level. And what's the role of public relations then in addressing this particular problem?

Jon 16:22  
yeah.

It's such a big question, Ben, because when you look at organizational decision making and the participation of public relations in organizational decision making, you come up against the fact that there are limitations to decisions that are currently made, which have to do with the social consequences of decisions as they are, as they are made. and there's a failure to look on the part of most management teams to the sort of advice that they could get from public relations practitioners relating to the social impact of the decisions they're trying to make. So an absolute principle is that organizational decision-making would be enriched by the incorporation of the perspective that public relations brings to the questions faced by organizations as they try to achieve whatever objectives they're setting for themselves.

And this is something discussed in government. How do we incorporate public relations perspectives into decision-making? At what point do we do that? Do we do that after we've made the decision to try to look for support for the decision as it's been made? Or do we incorporate the perspective into the decision-making process itself so that the decision itself is better as a result? And this is a dilemma for practice. The contribution that public relations makes is exactly that. That given the complexity of decision-making, it's a way of helping to deal with the complexity, which is a consequence of the social consequences of the decisions that are made. So this is the bind and the ambition for public relations practice, that it's a necessary part of better decision-making, but at the moment it's not incorporated into decision-making sufficiently. So decision-making is diminished in its quality as a result. I don't know

Ben 18:31  
That's

Jon 18:31  
if that's

Ben 18:31

pretty

Jon 18:32

clear. I don't know if that's clear.

Ben 18:33

clear. I mean, I've got to add some thoughts myself, but Shoni, you know, what's your view on, you know, why are we tasked or should we be tasked with addressing the challenges of organisational bias and decision making?

Shayoni 18:47

I mean, I couldn't capture it better than John did, but more tactically, I think, you know, we as public relations practitioners, we have a much better opportunity to influence organizational decision making and behaviors. If we better understand human behaviors, if we better understand biases, if we better understand choice environments that our audiences operate in, you know, we can act as boundary spanners. So, you know, we can connect internal decisions to societal impact and expectations, like John mentioned, you know, raising red flags early, we can become choice architects. And that is a phrase that was developed by Richard Pallor and Cass Sunstein in their book, Nudge. And what that looks to is intelligent design of the systems and environments that we operate in. So as communicators, we are choice architects. We design the environments that our audiences find themselves in and they engage in. So we have a huge influence in designing the right choice environment. So it's better. It's better. It's created to deliver better outcomes for our audiences and for our organization. So we can turn behavioral insights into intelligent design. For example, we can reduce friction. We can reduce sludge. And we can use behavioral science to mitigate biases in decision making. And then finally, of course, we are all reputation guardians. So we monitor emerging threats. And as part of that, we should be monitoring bias-driven risks. So whether those are biases that are arising from AI or whether they're biases systemically within the organization as a response to DEI pushback, DEI denial, or indeed in the face of misinformation. So our advice can mitigate and reduce or even contain damages before that sort of legal or social license is lost. So, thank you.

Ben 20:59

I think both of your responses are fantastic, actually. What I think an understanding of behavioural science is a thread which should run throughout all of our practice, essentially. And it can inform all those other elements that you've talked about in our work. And I'll just think about boundary spanning this activity in which we're reflecting back the views of external, typically, they can't be internal, but of different stakeholders back to, let's say, a leadership team. And I've been reading a book recently called Neuroscience for Organisational Change by Hilary Scarlett. And it's fantastic. And it's fantastic. It's a library of different studies related to this particular topic of essentially the application of bias and organisational decision making. But there's one paragraph which I'm going to say, but there's one paragraph which I'm going to read to you, which is just so useful. Professor Susan Fiske of Princeton University has conducted many experiments into bias and stereotyping. Fiske's research shows that people with power tend to pay less attention to others and individuate less. So leaders in organisations are more likely to stereotype others and put them in boxes. So in other words, in front of a leadership position, you are more susceptible to the bias of

stereotype,

Jon 22:22

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Ben 22:23

which means by very nature, you require additional

Jon 22:27

don't know if that's clear.

Ben 22:27

support through boundary spanning from the public relations function as a corrective to the position that you're in. And even worse, in a change situation or a crisis, even we're in a position or even just a serious public difficulty. We are often emotionally dysregulated. We're also subject to a variety of other stresses. And interestingly enough, stress also reduces our capacity to make rational decisions. Once again, what we need is the public relations function and others with an understanding of bias to step in to help. correct our decision making. Not only that, in this book, it's really clear that emotional dysregulation, particularly stress, actually typically has a different effect on us depending on our gender. So there's a series of very well respected and replicated studies looking at, in this case, it's Wall Street traders, actually, and banking, people in the financial services. And the fact that essentially in multiple studies, if you're a male, you stress will make you become essentially, you're more prone to be a risk taker and to take essentially less calculated risks. if you're female, you're more likely actually to try and search for corroborative evidence and look within a group to try and find a solution. So here's, these are these, we really need to understand all of this, these dynamics in order to help essentially support our organisations and their relationships with their stakeholders and their publics. So just what

Jon 24:11

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Ben 24:11

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Jon 24:11

know if that's clear.

Ben 24:11

you just, what do you think about that, guys? So just

Jon 24:12

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Jon 24:12

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Jon 24:13

on that because when Shayoni and I started to think about trying to set up the interest group within CIPR, we wrote a manifesto, which is available for the group. And our simple, simple argument in that is that basically in public relations practice, we are applied psychologists. We study behavior. We make predictions about how people will behave. And we do that, for the most part, without any detailed knowledge of psychological studies. And some of the things you've just mentioned, Ben, sometimes seem like revelations to people in practice, because they're not reading the research. The research is going on. The work is being done, as we find out at conferences like the BLED symposium on international public relations research. We find out the research is actually being carried out on these questions. But the difficulty in practice is that this research is not readily accessible to people in practice. But you're absolutely right. We need a full understanding of psychological principles to be effective in public relations practice, I would say.

Shayoni 25:29

I agree I agree I agree and I think you know fundamentally what we have in practice is high interest in these concepts but low capability and it's something that we know that we've talked about for for several years you know in John's case much longer and it's it's a struggle because you know I think organizations and individuals understand the importance of these principles not behavioral science but you look at any emerging area of interest such as misinformation you look at AI there's this high interest. John and I spoke at an event at a university last year and you know we agreed that PR and communications we are hype industry we jump on the back of every new trend but we don't really dig deep and I think that's the challenge so whilst as practitioners we are quite intuitive in our psychological application or application of psychology we are doing it without real understanding of the theory and the latest research which means it's ineffective we don't really know what works what doesn't we don't adopt an experimental mindset we are not testing our hypotheses we are not learning from things that don't work we are not evaluating effectively and you know this all contributes to why isn't PR at the top table which is a discussion that has been going on for decades and that's down to the fact we are unable to demonstrate in very clear black and white terms our value to organizations and what we bring so if we are going to measure

ourselves on outputs number of press releases you know the coverage attained the number of impressions we will never be as credible as a lawyer or a chartered accountant so we need to shift our mindset to think more strategically strategically about the discipline if we are to be taken seriously

Ben 27:21

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

If you're going to make a serious decision as a collective group, don't make it in the afternoon, you know, etc, etc. So I've rumbled a bit, but I'm really interested in your experiences as practitioners or advisors of where you've used behavioural science and you've superpowered or you've really helped a client or an employer if you were in-house.

Shayoni 31:17

Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you.

Ben 32:55

That's only

Shayoni 32:55

Thank you.

Ben 32:55

just if people that...

Shayoni 33:24

Thank you.

Ben 33:57

Put some meat on the bones here then. Give us it just quickly. Give us it. Give us an example of give us give us one give us one so I can.

Shayoni 34:15

Thank you.

Ben 34:41

Thank you.

Shayoni 34:45

Yeah, so an example is the NHS in South East London. At the start of the pandemic, they were very early to acknowledge that the pandemic and lockdown would result in a potential mental health crisis. And so they came to us and they wanted us to, you know, make their residents more aware of the tools available to them and how they could improve and how they could self-refer themselves to IAPT services. So, you know, how could we increase those self-referral rates in a situation of lockdown so South East London residents are better served? And when we came in, we ran our primary research to better understand the audience that informed our design and creative. So the campaign was called Free Your Mind. And what we found out was when it comes to mental health, people don't really understand what good and bad looks like. So we needed to start at the very basics of what is good mental health versus what is bad mental health or poor mental health. And also when it comes to, you know, talking about mental health, how can we equip the reference network, the social community around each individual to enable these conversations in a way that is positive. We ran experiments on multiple segments. We wanted to make this campaign as personalized as possible. So we had multiple audience segments and we ran creative experiments to understand what kind of design is most persuasive to different sections of that population. So how an 18-year-old would see content would not be how someone over 50 would. And the interesting insight that came out of this experimentation phase is we had an image of a woman wearing a hijab. Now, that can be quite a polarizing image. But when we ran our experiments, it performed really well. It performed really, really strongly. The image was, you know, representative of the community that we were serving. So the client took our advice and we pushed it out. And there was this initial outburst, as we kind of expected. We expected, you know, polarizing views about should you have someone who's got full coverage to be represented on NHS materials. But we held strong to our data. And actually, what we saw over the period of campaign, well, a lot of Muslim women were coming out in support of that image. And they were saying, this represents me. I'm really pleased I can now have this conversation. And the campaign itself in eight weeks led to 131.5 percent improvement in IAPT self-referrals. And there's this amazing graph on the NHS website, which showed the spike when the campaign went live and then the drop off when the campaign ceased to exist. And, you know, that had two further iterations, which shows the power of data-driven experimentation and proper measurement.

Ben 37:33

Thank you. I've got one example of supportive clients or in-house.

Jon 37:40

Thank you. I mean, my examples would be from crisis management, working with management teams setting up simulations where you run crisis situations for them to try to manage their way through. And the observation made there in a number of cases is of groups closing in on themselves and being reluctant to consider new information. They may believe, for example, that the processes they have in place, the procedures already in place,

will work. And the simulation, you demonstrate that they don't work, and that leads to a sort of paralysis on their part. They don't quite know how to deal with the new information of what they thought would work, will work. The purpose of the simulation is to draw out exactly this kind of problem for the management team, that they will run into difficulties making decisions when times are tough. It's what you were saying, Ben, about stress on decision makers. One of the identifying features of a crisis situation is that the decision makers involved are experiencing extreme stress. And the simulation is to try to help them deal with that. But one of the features is of group think. They close in on themselves. And I've seen this in practice, where they have been unable to make a decision. They have to almost wait with relief for the end of the simulation, without making a decision. But in real life, they wouldn't be able to do that. They'd have to and that's the simulation prepares them for the real life situation.

Ben 39:22

And we can think of, I'm sure we can all think of a huge array of different case studies where confirmation bias, which is essentially the bias in which we're predisposed to accept or value information that confirms or fits with our worldview or the information that we've previously understood. And there's a lot of people and group think the social norms element, where they've affected and searchaient those in the workplace and group think, you know, the social norms element, you know, where they've affected decision making negatively in organizations. So I'm thinking about the post office and Horizon scandal where you've got internal decision makers who are dismissing or ignoring alternative explanations to money going missing and essentially blaming 500 plus people who'd had no criminal records whatsoever for theft rather than thinking that it could actually be an IT issue. And they've enforced. And they've reinforced each other's mistake and their 設al side of the process. Although the Challenger Space Shuttle Disaster of 1986, I think it was with NASA, where managers disregarded engineers warnings about these O-ring seals at low temperatures. And they had a particular, you know, they decided to interpret that data as confirming the safety of the launch rather than, you know, something that was a warning signal contributing to the, obviously, the catastrophic failure there. And I'm sure, you know, you've all got examples of where failure to understand the biases or the irrationality of groups, either at a leadership level or a technical level or another part of an organization has led to, yeah, some problems. Have you got other kind of examples before we move on to a question of ethics?

Shayoni 41:06

Well, the UK COVID-19 inquiry, right? Where you could say that a lot of the preparedness was impacted by acute groupthink. And optimism bias. I mean, scientific advice and policy were sticking to that consensus that flu is our biggest threat. Because we saw the lack of a real... Well, a red team challenge, so to speak, led to the outputs and the outcomes that it did. There weren't any alternative scenarios being tested to the degree that they should have been

Ben 41:39  
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Shayoni 41:39  
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Ben 41:39

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Shayoni 41:40

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Ben 41:40

explain what a red team challenge, I know, what's red teaming, Sean? Could you just explain what a red team challenge, I know,

Shayoni 41:43

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Ben 41:43

what's red teaming, Can you just

Shayoni 41:43

red team is a team that's devised to critique independently and objectively to a particular hypothesis or a particular insight. And it's very... We do a lot of red teaming for clients. And I think it's really useful to bring in independent views into a high level decision being made. And going back to how groupthink influences leadership at the top. And we talked about Apple and how they, you know, sunk \$10 billion over 10 years despite clear signals that it wasn't working. And, you know, you could have red teamed it and seen this was going nowhere and recoup that money. And I think, you know, that sort of leadership, the biases leadership often feel under uncertain and stressful conditions, does suppress that sort of independent voice, the counterintuitive idea. So, as leaders, we should be aware that we are open to these biases.

Ben 42:37

Thank you. And there's a role for diversity here, very clearly, because diversity of thinking because a lot of the case studies that we've discussed here about, and John, you very specifically talked about the homogeneity of a particular group leading to, and a lack of heterogeneous kind of content within a group leading to a particular problematic thinking. John, have you got further thoughts on case studies or the general challenge of bias?

Jon 43:04

There's so much to bring in here, Ben. I mean, you talked about, we've talked about boundary spanning and the role of public relations practitioners in decision making. And one of the points about the role of the practitioner is that he or she working across organizational boundaries comes into contact outside the organization with new information, which needs to be brought in for the benefit of the decision making groups within the organization. And some of that information brought in will be exactly the sort of red team challenge material that Shioni mentioned, that the person who is working across the organizational boundary

has a role to challenge on the basis of new information gathered outside the organization, has a role to challenge the assumptions that are being made by decision makers within the organization. On the question of variety, there's a principle of requisite variety, which is recognized that in order for any decision making group to be able to understand the problems that they face, they've got to have within them, within the group, they've got to

have sufficient experience to be able to draw on that experience to understand the problems they face. So requisite variety is absolutely essential, it's tied in with question to diversity, bringing diverse viewpoints into decision making. But public relations makes part of this contribution

to increasing diversity in decision making by bringing alternate views into play. There's an excellent case study that goes back quite a few years now that Gerd Hofstetter wrote of a company in Holland importing coffee from Angola. Dow Egberts was the coffee company, but they assumed that it would be fine to continue to import this coffee from that source despite the political problems in Angola where the coffee was being produced. There was a Dutch public reaction to doing business with Angola under existing circumstances. The management team were oblivious to that social reaction to their continuing business with Angola. Hofstetter argued that there's a need for somebody in organisations to challenge existing viewpoints because they may be leading the organisation, as in the case of Dow Egberts, in entirely the wrong direction. So this is a benefit from public relations practice contact with the outside world and different viewpoints to improving the quality of decision making or the information that's drawn on in decision making. There's also moral and ethical questions involved here that we'll come into too.

Ben 46:03

I'll bring up the question of ethics in a second. You know, that's a very, it's a famous and very good case study. It does remind me of the phrase that my old friend Sue Walsenholm, who was the past president of CIPR, used to say, you know, "Are you causing the right types of trouble?" You know, that's a lot of public relations practice internally to ask those right annoying but the

Shayoni 46:28

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Ben 46:28

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Shayoni 46:28

have a lot of questions.

Ben 46:29

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Shayoni 46:30

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Shayoni 46:30

have a lot of questions.

Ben 46:31

externally and internally part of our job is to

Shayoni 46:34

We'll have a lot of questions.

Ben 46:35

raise questions, not

Shayoni 46:35

We'll have a lot

Ben 46:36

for the

Shayoni 46:36

of questions.

Ben 46:36

sake

Shayoni 46:36

We'll have a lot of

Ben 46:37

of

Shayoni 46:37

questions.

Ben 46:37

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Shayoni 46:37

We'll

Ben 46:37

but

Shayoni 46:37

have

Ben 46:37

to

Shayoni 46:38

a lot of questions. We'll have

Ben 46:38

expand

Shayoni 46:38  
a lot of questions.

Ben 46:38  
our collective thinking and make sure we're not falling into these numerous traps around, you know, around bias. Yes, let's move on to ethics because it is it is a question that's often asked and about, you know, understanding, you know, 134, 137 or however many depends on your book you're reading. But heuristics,

Shayoni 47:01  
We'll have a lot of questions.

Ben 47:02  
that's the sort of the accepted volume around that

Shayoni 47:05  
We'll have a lot

Ben 47:05  
heuristics

Shayoni 47:06  
of questions.

Ben 47:06  
that we're plagued by as individuals. Understanding this can, as we saw in the Zurich experiment, the Zurich University experiment with AI, it can lead to the application of that understanding in an unethical manner. It sort of, you know, gives us an unfair advantage over our fellow human beings that are not aware of the biases to which they're plagued. We can play them like puppets is the accusation. Now, I've got a very strong view of this, but I'm I'm really interested in your kind of retort or your response to that kind of thinking. Either of you, who wants to go first? Shona,

Shayoni 47:45  
We'll

Ben 47:45  
you

Shayoni 47:45  
have a lot of questions. I'll

Ben 47:45  
go first and

Shayoni 47:46

go

Ben 47:46  
then jump.

Shayoni 47:46  
first. I'll go first. I used to be

Ben 47:48  
Okay.

Shayoni 47:48  
asked this a lot, actually, and I'm pleased to report that over the last few years, but I've been it's been less so. So I feel like people are understanding and more accepting of behavioral science within practice, which is which is pleasing. But my response is science is science. It's in the hands of the practitioner. It's in the person who applies science. So you could use science to create life saving vaccines. As we saw the COVID pandemic, you could use science to manipulate and to create bombs, as we've seen in our lives and we're seeing today. So it really is in the hands of the practitioner. It is a methodology. It is a it's a deeper understanding of our decision making processes, which you can use to build better choice environments, to help people see decisions in better light so they can make better decisions for themselves and for their families and communities. or you can do it to be obstructive, to manipulate, to push them into certain scenarios, which is beneficial to you. Now, it's very clear from the behavioral science world that behavioral science is all about providing more agency. It's not about reducing agency. I think that's something that we need to be very clear. And the people who have done the work, the research in judgment and decision making in heuristics, they are very clear that this insight is there to create better conditions for our fellow humans. Now that insight has, of course, been taken and weaponized and will continue to be weaponized in the future. We've seen it all the way from Cambridge Analytica, all the way we're seeing it today with how misinformation is being played out. Bad actors have a very sharp understanding of human behavior. They use those insights intelligently. They're experimental. They're constantly adapting and interpreting and augmenting to be more persuasive to people and to radicalize and bring people into their camp. And it's also obviously a big part of AI biases baked into AI. And we really need to understand the bias that AI is prone to and is going to continue to increase because there's a lot of manipulation of AI itself. You know, there was an article the other day. And I can't remember the authors about how AI needs vaccines just as human does. So I think we need to be aware that it can be used for propaganda. But we as communicators have signed up to a code of conduct. And that does include not using these sciences for propaganda.

Ben 50:18  
Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Jon 50:26  
So

Ben 50:26

Thank you.

Jon 50:26

the challenge is quite straightforward that we need as thorough of familiarity

Ben 50:30

Thank you. Thank you.

Jon 50:30

as it's practical and possible

Ben 50:32

Thank you.

Jon 50:32

to develop.

Ben 50:33

Thank you. Thank you.

Jon 50:36

Thank you. That's an issue in the way practitioners currently prepare for the work that they do. And this is where you are up against the point that public relations is still very much an emerging practice. People still come into it from a variety of backgrounds and they will have gaps in their preparation. And it's still a continuing debate about what would constitute a comprehensive education for training, preparation for public relations practice. But in public relations I think we're confronted with four straightforward questions which we then work through as we're trying to do the work that we do in practice.

Have to do with the current state of any set of relationships. The second having to do with how they need to develop over time if the parties, those relationships are going to make progress. The third having to do with things that may in some way disrupt those relationships. The fourth, and this gets at the ethical questions, is what ought relationships be in any picture of relationships that you're looking at. So if you're working for a client organisation, thinking about the important relationships with which it's involved, what ought those relationships be? Well, behavioural science informs answers to all those questions that I've just raised, it should inform answers to all those questions and provide thorough answers to those questions. Fundamentally though, fundamentally there's a need for humility in approaching the decisions that are made in organisations and in public relations practice. And it's, Sharon has mentioned this, I mean, we are working with what's been described as "bounded rationality". There's a famous writer on this, Herbert Simon, a Nobel Prize winning economist but also behavioural scientist. Recognising, he recognised, and he's responsible for the term "bounded rationality". Basically, we have limited resources to work with. And the problems that we're trying to work on now. One of the fears is that we have, as a human race, created problems for ourselves that we don't really have the ability to now manage. But Ben, you're heavily involved in these questions looking at the impact of artificial intelligence, the worries about artificial intelligence. Are we creating something that's going to create so many problems for us that we won't know how to manage them? And you

can think of any number of questions, another large question that we have nationally, and this is not just us, but other countries as well. Mass immigration. How on earth are we going to deal with this problem? It's a huge problem. Do we have the capacity in our decision making to deal with the problem? Lots of other examples. And lots of other examples. But except that our rationality is bounded, the decisions that we make are decisions that we'll do. And again, this is Herbert Simon. We make decisions that we'll do. And his term is we satisfice. We make decisions which are in some ways satisfactory and they're sufficient for the purpose. But time tells that actually many decisions that are made aren't really, aren't really fit for purpose. But we

Ben 54:29  
they're

Jon 54:29  
discovered that after the event. We have to do a lot

Ben 54:31  
suboptimal i mean on this issue this this question around ethics you know it's it's public relations is amoral it doesn't have any morality attached to it it's exactly as she only says whether it's behavioral science or any other element of public relations it's it's a tool with which you can either you know you can pick up a hammer and you can knock on a nail to fix your neighbor's house or you can you know bash them over the head with it it's still a hammer it's not got any morality attached to it and still you start swinging your arms you know and this is exactly the same with behavioral science so just to a readers my listeners even might pick up john's reference to ai there well yeah i'm co-editing a book called ai for pr with steve waddington and a range of other expert contributors including dr john one um but i i um uh just a talk on the biases within and she only mentioned it as well and within artificial intelligence let's be very clear about it the multiple multiple biases within the data set and within the algorithm that then determines how the data set is um interpreted uh weirdly enough my family's a victim of algorithmic bias and artificial intelligence a quite famous case they my wife's a singer um she's a she's a dolly parton tribute and she was kicked off facebook and um and instagram because of a a decision made by an algorithm essentially um artificial intelligence decision as were about 30 000 other tributes from around the world and had a massive impact on their careers and and that was um a bias set within the the by programmers um and that playing out that kind of decision making is playing out all over the world and whether we uh when we reapply for insurance for our house or our car or in certain countries whether we get a healthcare cover or not etc so there's lots of ai driven or machine learning driven decisions that are informed by algorithms happening all over the place now that's interestingly enough we may just be replacing certain types of bias with other types of bias because you know what we what we don't want to say is that oh you know our ai decision making is per se worse because actually it removes or has a potential to remove all sorts of human bias biases from the decision making however as john suggests we might just be introducing a whole load of new ones based on the data sets a really famous example being uh cctv cameras and facial recognition software powered by artificial intelligence famously uh the training data involved is over populated with white faces particularly male white faces and underpopulated by pretty much any other type of face on a proportional basis and therefore the systems make rounding errors essentially they make sort of uh calculative errors um uh related to the biases in the training data set and that's

involved say for instance an example of where that's played out has been in the um probation service that using ai in america and the uk and the criminal justice system in america using ai to try and solve cases um to uh with very bad results um essentially sort of um racism uh writ large across the decisions that they've made so yeah there's some examples there so i'm i'm as i say as you say john i think what we'd probably like to see is the removal of certain biases and the introduction of a whole set batch of new ones driven by a whole set of different biases uh we can all look forward to that

Shayoni 58:06

So can I also add, I mean, we're talking about biases. Behavioral science itself is baked with bias. Right. So if you think about weird populations, right. So Western, educated, rich, industrialized, and Democrat. This was a term that came about in 2010. It was something that was brought to our attention by Joe Henik and others. And what this basically says is found that most of the insights in behavioral science were skewed to a certain type of demographic. And so a lot of these insights, we talked about replication crisis and context. A lot of these insights weren't replicating because they were developed on segments that are not representative of communities around the world. And certainly that has impacted how behavioral science as a discipline has grown in the global south. You know, a lot of the key studies that behavioral science is based on, is built on, are having to be re-experimented in the global south to see whether some of these insights actually stick or they don't. So bias is everywhere. We just have to accept that bias runs through us. It runs through the discipline that talks about bias itself. And just be more vigilant towards mitigating it.

Ben 59:24

i'm going to ask you about so let we talked at the beginning of the conversation about um thinking about if you're a practitioner and how um how you might discuss or think about bias and then the context of bias within organizational decisions and then our role of addressing that if you want to after you finish listening to this podcast if you want to go away and find out more information what are some um of your favoured sources that um you know practitioner who might really not have thought much about behavioural science before where can they go and find out more

Shayoni 1:00:04

We get asked this question all the time. There is a lot of insight and resources out there. I suppose we've got to think about the wider capability within the industry. You could start small with the books, which inform very basic understanding of these concepts, such as Thinking Fast and Slow and Nudge and Robert Cialdini's work. I would definitely recommend a great podcast called Choiceology by Katie Milkman. And she takes a bias or a behavioral nugget every podcast and sort of deconstructs it into very interesting storytelling. Of course, you can go to our website, lynn.global, where we have a bunch of resources freely available. We have interviews with behavioral scientists and misinformation experts. And the other one I will plug is Habit Weekly by Sam Salazar, which is a newsletter which brings you the best of behavioral design. So when we think about choice architecture, it's a really good place to start about how do you create better environments for your users, for your audiences and within your organizations.

Ben 1:01:14

Thank you. Great. Thanks, Shani. They sound superb resources. John, what about yourself?

Jon 1:01:19

There are organisations like the Institute for Public Relations in the US and they did for a number of years have a behavioural insights research interest and they produced some quite readable guides to applications of behavioural science to practice. So that's a good starting point still to go there.

Research groups attached to organisations like the UN looking at applications of behavioural science to policy development find the same sort of material on the government communication service website here in the A lot of material there. They drew on a behavioural science team for a number of years which I think has been largely disbanded now but there's still some very good resources available there. And the sort of reading lists attached to those resources will give ample introduction to the possibilities of using behavioural science in practice.

Ben 1:02:29

Yes. Just to sort of echo that point about the GCS, the Government Communications Service materials, there's a huge library of resources within there that are free to use and they're applicable for organisations of different sizes. There's a bias in some of the materials towards larger organisations because this is a training scheme. very much. These are resources that are targeted towards those working in government departments which tend to be of the larger size. One other, a couple of other things that I just to mention was really short and it's really simple, but it gives a great flavour of behavioural science. And that's a 12 minute video you can find of Robert Cialdini's work called Influence the Science of Persuasion, which is the title of his book. But if you Google it, you'll find it on YouTube and it's a great introduction to six of common biases, including status quo, social norms, liking, authority, consistency, and I think reciprocity is the other one. And I'm gonna, yeah, I'm gonna mention the book that I talked about earlier on that I'm just reading at the moment, Neuroscience for Organisational Change by Hilary Scarlett. I like it because it's full of references to papers and cases and other books really, but in very palatable form about how decisions are made. I'd read it even if you're not involved in organisational change. There's lots of there, lots of information there that will help you become a better advisor. And that's what a lot of our work is around or should be. This advisory capability. Jon, you mentioned earlier on about, you know, relationships. What kind of relationships do we want? Well, according to the CIPR, we want sustained planned goodwill between an organisation, mutual goodwill between an organisation and its publics. And a lot of our work I always talk about is either changing awareness, changing attitudes or changing behaviours. And all of those require an understanding of thought and all of those, therefore, because thought is often irrational, we need to understand irrational thought. If we just work as if all of that, if we suppose that changing awareness, changing attitude and changing behaviours, we're just changing rational thought, then we've missed half of the picture, if not more. We're just working on a completely it's a bit like a car. And you're instead of trying to fix the car, you are working on a model of the car that only has the really shiny parts in it. You know, it's like it doesn't really work like that. you've got to. You've got to get down and dirty in and work out what the whole engine does, so to speak.

Shayoni 1:05:20

Well, we are homo sapiens, not homo economicus. And I think fundamentally, that is

something that needs to be better understood and felt within organizations. We do not make rational decisions. And that includes the leadership within organizations. So, yeah, we need to embrace that more.

Ben 1:05:36

Thank you.

Jon 1:05:36

But you've also opened another topic for discussion at another time, I think, Ben, that the language we use in practice is indicative of assumptions that we make about the way practice is to unfold and be effective. And some of those assumptions need to be held up to the light and looked at very carefully.

Ben 1:06:00

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

Well,

Shayoni 1:06:12

So, yeah, we need to embrace that more. So, yeah, we need to embrace that more. So, yeah, we need to embrace that more. So, yeah, we need to embrace that A couple of things that I want to do.

Ben 1:06:19

let's all right, let's say let's add that on to the end of the conversation, so so well, let's just add this as an additional kind of postscript then in terms of how shall I introduce it? Probably just anything else you want to add, talk about anything else you want to add, Sean. I'll

Shayoni 1:06:36

Yeah,

Ben 1:06:36

just add that

Shayoni 1:06:36

well, when we think about biases and, you know, where do we go from here in this age of polarization, misinformation, technological advancement, I mean, there's obviously challenges that come out of the over-reliance that we have of AI. You know, we have challenges around synthetic content, bot campaigns, which we've previously referenced, politicized model training, even, you know, how do we cope when we're moving from basic biases to weaponized bias in AI. But I think also being more granular around non-technological challenges we might face. Well, we're facing now and we might face even more often in the future, you know, there's things around proximity bias in hybrid work, you know, how the workplace has changed in itself. And we have new data that shows that fully remote staff is 31% less likely to be promoted and 35% more likely to be laid off than in-office peers, even when performance is matched. So here we see how managers are unconsciously rewarding who they physically see. And, you know, what does that mean for the development of the future workforce? And one thing that I think is really close to my

heart, and I think is very close to the industry. Another thing that this industry is thinking about ageism and how does that solve, how do biases affect how ageism plays out in the workplace. You know, looking at IMF data, a quarter of employees are still labeled over 50s as being old, even though IMF data says that today's 70 year old has the cognitive fitness of a 53 year old in 2000. But in our industry, in the PR industry, the stats are even more shocking. Reports from two equity initiatives, Break the Silence, of which I'm a founder, as well as women in PR show the ageism hits women faster and harder. And the latest women in PR census shows that 78% of women feel overlooked from 40 onwards. Here. All right. Yes. I think that's a lot of confidence, and that should shock us all. So I think we need to talk about those subtle nuances that affect the workplace as much as we talk about deep decision making within organizations because they are all part of that complex tapestry that affects the outcomes.

Ben 1:09:07

Yeah, by complete coincidence, I'm the person that started doing the analysis of the census. Well, first

Shayoni 1:09:16

I

Ben 1:09:16

was the

Shayoni 1:09:16

know.

Ben 1:09:16

Office, Office for National Statistics as

Shayoni 1:09:18

Yes.

Ben 1:09:18

a hobby. This was my hobby,

Shayoni 1:09:21

It

Ben 1:09:21

everybody.

Shayoni 1:09:21

was your hobby.

Ben 1:09:22

I used to because I'm a nerd, I used to look at the Office for National Statistics data relating to what's called the standard occupational codes for public relations. And I worked out methodology where basically we could isolate PR people. And we did that in 2017, did it in

2019. And then, hey, Presto, we had the 2021 census. And, yeah, we managed to get the data for those in England and Wales. Unfortunately, Scotland and Northern Ireland, I'm still waiting on. But as Shana mentioned, that was very clear evidence that showed that, essentially, we were missing about 3,400 women between what we call practitioner level. What we got in the data is called professional level and director level. So without kind of going into too much detail, what this revealed was that women in particular, those that were in their particular in their 30s, And those that, by correlation, we knew had started families, were essentially being punished for having children and finding it very difficult to get back into the workforce. And that missing women's study was really interesting because it unpicked some of the qualitative data around why that was happening and how that was happening to those women. And Shona talks about an initiative that she's been driving to help sort of addressed to provide some of the solutions to this particular problem that we've revealed. So, yeah,

Jon 1:10:43

Thank

Ben 1:10:43

and that

Jon 1:10:43

you.

Ben 1:10:43

is often one of the biases that play there is a affinity bias, which is very, very common in recruitment, where essentially we prefer we pick candidates who are most like us. And this really happens a lot in recruitment and it's not a bias that necessarily disappears with artificial intelligence either.

Shayoni 1:11:04

It was your hobby. I do recommend listeners, if they haven't, to look at Break the Silence report because it takes the Missing Women Insights and takes it one step further, where we have created the industry's largest study on gender equity and for the first time having a very high representation of male views, which have been missing from this discussion. We have a 31% male response rate on this particular study. And it looks at ageism. It looks at parenthood. It looks at next gen, but also looks at allyship. And I think those insights from male colleagues around some of these issues is tremendously interesting to read, understand. And we need to take those insights away if we have to create a more equitable society.

Ben 1:11:59

Yeah, so the summary here is that public relations itself, as an industry, is subject to a serious number of biases, one of which is manifest in ageism and also in the state of employment for women returning to work after having children and looking after children.

John, anything else to add yourself?

Jon 1:12:39

Thank you.

Thank

Ben 1:13:18

a good question. You are it's

Jon 1:13:25

you.

Ben 1:13:25

on for unfortunately it's not a maybe it's a it's a early studies are very clear that a cognitive offloading is as a prime risk of artificial intelligence use. And it depends on how we use it. It depends on lots of factors. It's and by the way, it's not this is just for the lessons. It's not about AI doesn't make you more stupid to work like that. It just means that you are at

Jon 1:13:54

you.

Ben 1:13:54

risk of not exercising some of your cognitive muscle and you become less practiced at certain types of thinking, but a bit like some of the other topics that we've touched on that's one for

Jon 1:14:06

Thank

Ben 1:14:06

another.

Jon 1:14:06

you.

Ben 1:14:07

I'm writing a chapter on that. So I could bore you senseless with that one. Okay, I'm going to break to a close because I'm wary of time and I've taken away lots of your time this afternoon. Thank you very much to to Shaeoni Lynn and to John White. I'm Ben Verinder. This has been the CIPR engage podcast on commenting bias in organizational decision making and the role of public relations. Thank you.

Shayoni 1:14:34

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Jon 1:14:36

Thanks, man.