



B.E. GOOD! Podcast

Behavioral Economics for Good!
Nudging Better Business and Better Lives.



Episode 19: Piyush Tantia | Scaling the Social Impact of Behavioral Science

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BVA Nudge Unit 00:06

Welcome to the B.E. Good! Podcast, where we explore the application of behavioural economics for good in order to nudge better business and better lives.

Eric Singler 00:16

Hi and welcome to this episode of B.E. Good, brought to you by BVA Nudge Unit, Global Consultancy specialising in the application of behavioural science for successful behaviour change. Every month we get to speak with a leader in a field of behavioural science in order to get to know more about them, their work and its application to emerging issues. My name is Eric Singler with BVA Nudge Unit and with me is my colleague, Scott Young. Hello, Scott.

Scott Young 00:49

Hey, Eric. Good afternoon. And it's really nice to be here with you. I'm very excited to be joining you for this episode. And I'm very happy to be introducing our guest Piyush Tantia. Piyush is the Chief Innovation Officer and a board member at Ideas42, where he previously served as its Executive Director for many years. As many of our listeners no doubt already know, Ideas42 is a nonprofit organisation that uses insights from behavioural science, to improve lives, to build better systems and policies and to drive social change. And quite simply Ideas42 is one of the leading practitioner organisations in our field. And it's done a great deal to contribute to the growth and development of behavioural science over this past decade. So huge welcome. It's really nice to have you with us.

Piyush Tantia 01:44

Thank you. And thank you for the very kind introduction. I'm very glad to be here.

Eric Singler 01:48

Thanks Piyush. We are excited to speak with you. And what we would like to start with is to better know your background and your early career. I think you have a background in financial

services, and a master's in public administration from Harvard University. Can you tell us about how you came to be interested in behavioural science.

Piyush Tantia 02:19

So I've been interested in psychology for as long as I can remember, even as a teenager, I was reading psychology books for fun. And then for work, I wound up becoming a management consultant. And in that work, I didn't directly focus on psychology, but I did a lot of product design work and marketing, and consulting work in retail banking. So I got to think about consumer behaviour a lot. And then I was thinking about the next steps in my career. At the same time, I discovered some of the popular books that had come out on nudge: Predictably Irrational; Stumbling on Happiness. I just devoured this, I loved everything I read there. So I then had found what I wanted to do and the PhD had always been in the back of my mind for many years. So I thought "okay, let me go talk to some of these academics and see if I can get involved somehow". One thing led to another I met Sendhil Mullainathan - he responded to my cold email and we met in New York, hit it off, talked for three hours and then met Eldar Shafir that same day. And I wound up joining them at Ideas42 to start just trying out some projects, and then just grew from there.

Eric Singler 03:50

You mentioned some of them... Sendhil etc. Could you share about any other mentors that had a strong influence on you? Or do you have any researcher or other people who have played an influential role in your professional career

04:09

So many... so besides Sendhil and Eldar, was also Antoinette Schoar, who's at MIT. So three of them, were really very involved day to day with building Ideas42 with me, in the early days, so I learned mostly everything I know from them in the early years. And then so many others have been influential over the years - we've been good friends and colleagues - and been helping us: Todd Rogers, Katy Milkman, Angela Duckworth, probably forgetting many others. [Inaudible] at Chicago, Richard Thaler. So I've had the privilege of being exposed to these amazing people and working with them very closely over the years.

Scott Young 04:58

I think we'd like to hear a little bit more about the story of Ideas42. I know you mentioned you started to allude to the founding, but maybe you could tell us a little more about the thinking behind it and why you saw the need or the opportunity, and, you know, and then where it went from there.

Piyush Tantia 05:16

So Ideas42 was started just as kind of an informal project at Harvard back in 2008. The goal was always to find ways to apply the science rather than necessarily generate new science. But once I joined with my strategy consulting background, we, we did what a consultant would do: we had a strategy retreat and thought about: "okay, what what does everybody want from this?" There were lots of people involved, or loosely connected. And we really, everyone honed in on this goal that we wanted to have social impact first. And then if we got additional knowledge creation and academic insights - that was icing on the cake. So we focused on that and we started doing projects, not to answer research questions, but to solve social problems. So that was a subtle, but very important pivot. And this is early, I mean, this is before anybody else had started doing this, right? This is 2009, 2010. In those years, and we quickly realised that being inside a university made that quite difficult because for every contract, every grant, the university would ask, "Who's the principal investigator?" "Are we going to publish from this?". We had to do, you know, all sorts of bureaucratic approvals and all in the mould of research. So yeah, it was difficult to do some of the projects we were doing. And at that time, the financial crisis was in full swing (the mortgage crisis), and we were trying to do all these projects with private sector entities, banks, etc. to help with loss mitigation. And the university just wasn't happy with this type of work. And at the same time, a couple of our major funders said, well, you should really be separate from the university. So all of those things came together. And we made the tough decision to leave Harvard, and set up a nonprofit. So we did that, in early, early 2010, we incorporated that then it took us about almost two years, actually to transition out fully towards the grants. We got new grants into Ideas42, we started building up the nonprofit separately. And it's now got over 100 people working in 30 to 40 countries at any given time on a range of issues.

Scott Young 07:55

Yeah. Which is really, really incredible what you've been able to accomplish and build there. I was curious, as you look back, if there are several projects in particular that really stand out to you. Maybe some of the earlier ones, or things that you felt were really notable.

Piyush Tantia 08:14

Yeah, there's one I want to talk about, because it's one that we've started to scale. And that's quite rare in the behavioural space, because we're still new at this. So we've done a lot of projects - a lot of people have done a lot of projects once, but very few have tried to take that insight into different settings. So this is work we've been doing on cash transfers. These are very, very common in developing countries as a social safety net. So essentially, low income families receive a certain amount of money every month or every quarter from the government. It's unconditional, they can use it for whatever their needs are. So we wanted to add some behavioural elements to that to help people use that money for things that they wanted to use it for that might be a little longer term, therefore behaviorally difficult to do. Now, what happens in these cases, more often than not, is they set up a kind of a kiosk in a market, because everyone's going there anyway. And that's where you get the cash. So the context is very simple. There's all sorts of tempting things being sold all around you, it's very easy for you to go and buy those fried foods and new toy. So we wanted to see "Well, could we help people set aside money for things like better, nutritious food for their families or school fees or investing in an asset?" So the intervention we designed uses insights from a lot of people's work to these goal setting elements. People decide what they want to save for. There's a planning element. So they decide, "okay, how much money are they going to set aside" and, you know, they track progress towards that goal. And then we give them a little burlap pouch. So there's partitioning. So on the spot, when they get the cash, they can put some of it into the burlap sack. And this is because most of these people are not in formal digital financial services as yet. Once they get there, then that partitioning can happen digitally. But right now it happens physically. And this has worked really well. We've now started doing this in Madagascar, and we've seen a 16% increase in better meals being prepared for the family in Tanzania and Kenya. We see 6 to 7% increases in savings. We see higher debt repayment in Kenya from all of this.

Piyush Tantia 10:56

But there are some very interesting insights about doing this in the field and the types of modifications we needed. Yes, this great story from Madagascar, where everything had to be pictorial because the literacy rate is very, very low, right? So we had an artist draw these images of people who are imagining goals, right. So those little thought bubble that say "Okay, I'm imagining buying a car, or bicycle or whatever." The first time we user-tested this, people said, "Oh, these must be rich people". We said, "Why do you say that?" "Because they have all their teeth." Because they all had big smiles in these images. So then we had to modify that image and black out a few teeth so the users could identify with these folks. And this little story really highlights how important these little details of delivery are. So nothing changed about the fundamental insight of goal setting or partitioning. But precisely how we delivered every detail mattered a lot. And we couldn't have known that upfront from any research insights, we had to go into the field and tinker with that and user test. So I now think about our work in two buckets. There's a design concept that comes from behavioural insight. But then there's building that and building that thing in a way that it works in context and is scalable. And similarly, when we went to Tanzania and Kenya, we had to change the types of goals we had there. There were some gender related interpretations that were different in Kenya versus Tanzania, even though they're so close to each other. So we had to - you know, I believe there was an Kenya or Tanzania, I forget which country - we had to have gender specific pouches to really highlight that financials and savings are not something that just men do. This is for anyone. So that tells us that scaling is not easy, not easy. It's not just about replicating one thing, in the same way with high fidelity, you have to do a lot of these adaptations.

Scott Young 13:18

Yeah. And I was in fact planning to ask you a little bit about some of the most difficult challenges that you've faced across time and across projects? And is it this idea of local customization? And some of the kinds of communications challenges you just mentioned in the global south? Or are there other big challenges that you look back on over the last 10 years or so that come to mind?

Piyush Tantia 13:45

This is definitely one that's emerged in the last few years, because we've started to try to really scale things, right? We feel like we've done a lot of experimentation. Now we want to scale up those insights. So these challenges come up more recently. But another challenge that stayed pretty consistent throughout is always convincing a large, complex organisation to try something new. But even the simplest project we do is innovation. It's not best practice transfer. Like I used to do it my management consulting days. So I always have to set people's expectations like "No, I have not done this at five other entities just like you - can't guarantee this will work". This is a totally new idea that we're trying with you for the first time. So it's very... that remains really challenging. So I'm also curious about you know, your experience in that you both work with these very large organisations and even though they are private sector, they probably become just as bureaucratic as a large NGO or a government.

Scott Young 14:53

Yeah, I mean, I for one was kind of nodding to myself as I listened to that last part because it definitely rings very true that you're dealing with large organisations that, on the one hand love the idea of something new, and there's perhaps someone there who's a champion and excited about it. But then they're facing a much larger challenge of convincing people to do things differently. And yeah, I think it's a very common challenge we have of introducing a new way of thinking and a new way of doing things and how do you generate momentum and energy on, you know, on the client side? Or how do you feel? Do you have some thoughts on that one? I know you're in that situation all the time.

Eric Singler 15:41

I think in fact, before being about applying behavioural science, it is about change. And we have to fight against static bias and habits, and I think it is so important. You mentioned before Sendhil Mullainathan and I was very inspired by his book Scarcity, which is really about when you have so many crucial things in mind, it's difficult for you to think about better decision. So here it is at the individual level. So I think at your individual level, they are your past habits, which are difficult to change, and it is the same at an organisational level with the static bias. And first we have to think about how to fight this before maybe thinking about how to apply behavioural science or to apply behavioural science to infuse behavioural science.

Scott Young 16:48

Yeah, I would say in our situation, there are occasions where RFPs are coming to us, you know, so obviously there is a need and so forth. But it's probably more frequent that we're going to an organisation that has a general vague interest in behavioural science, perhaps someone who read a few books and is interested and engaged. But then again, helping them have an influence within their organisation and finding the right intersection of a project and a budget and internal champions.

Piyush Tantia 17:25

Yeah, yeah. And we are often in a more challenging situation, because our mandate often comes from a foundation or a government contract to the funder. But then we have to convince some other organisation that we're actually implementing an intervention with, and they didn't necessarily come asking us so we're usually reaching out folks saying, "Okay, Mr College President or Provost, would you like to work on college dropout rate and reducing dropout? We think we could help!" And also approaching executives at different places, we found it's always challenging, but if we align with the organization's top priorities, then the project at least gets done. Because we're not trying to make somebody add on something extra - to your point, Eric. If they already have priorities, we'll try to just hijack those in a way and help them reach those same goals with behavioural science.

Scott Young 18:28

So starting with where they would like to go, and then finding the way behavioural science can help them get there, as opposed to introducing other things on their agenda. Makes a lot of sense.

Piyush Tantia 18:39

Yeah, that at least gets the senior level leadership buy-in. Then in operationalizing any intervention, then you have a whole other layer of folks who have concerns: "Are you the IT people? The operations people?" and everybody else who are actually implementing these things in the field. That I don't think we have a brilliant solution to except, you know, just trying to make things as easy as possible and convincing folks that "Look, we're not rolling this

out. This is just a small pilot. If you don't like it, if something breaks, don't worry, the cost is nothing". We'll just not really iterate and do something different.

Scott Young 19:22

Yeah, I often feel as though, you know, sometimes we don't take our own advice, or we can get so caught up in things that we forget some of the most important mantras of, you know, "make it easy". Well, how can we make it easy for the organisation? Because if we're demanding too much of their time, too much of their energy, too much of not just financial resources, but really, it's usually people resources... it becomes problematic. Though, with that said, I think it's a balancing act because we're often trying to teach and instil and inspire behavioural science thinking as well. And we can't do that if we just look at a situation and hand them a report. So how do we engage them and get them excited, but not take so much of their time that it becomes a problem and a barrier?

Piyush Tantia 20:17

Yeah, exactly. Yeah. So many times, we may start with what is seemingly one project, but then it becomes two or three, because in the process of implementing it, we have to change the behaviour of some customer service staff or clinic staff etc. Then that's another behavioural challenge - just separated from the original one that we might have started with. So these things always become very layered and iterative. And that, again, goes back to that idea of building carefully. And worrying about all these details. Yeah, it's interesting, even though we've talked about it sometimes: could we separate the behavioural design from the project management and implementation? And we've hesitated to do that. Because in implementing these things, you end up having to modify to fit the operational constraints, and that person doing the modification better understand the behavioural science.

Scott Young 21:17

Yeah, I would say, you know, for that reason, we emphasise a lot of co-creation and co-implementation, and really try very hard to engage and leverage the resources from the client side, because they know their business better than we're ever going to know it. Some of the tools that Eric's developed, like Nudge Labs and some of the other things we call Behavioural Sprints, they're really all about trying to tap into the knowledge that we think the organisation

has. But even then, at the execution stage, it can be difficult to make sure you're still involved. Because sometimes they run with the ideas, and then it can be hard for us to really make sure that they're being done the way we hope and also to measure, you know, in the backend. So I know we've been talking about challenges, I thought it might be nice as well, though, to hear a little more about some of the maybe the most fulfilling aspects of what you've been doing at Ideas42. I don't know if that's around projects, or more broadly than that, but the things you'd like to share there.

Piyush Tantia 22:33

Yeah, there are challenges, but at the end of the day, we've implemented so many hundreds of successful projects over the years. The company has grown, a lot more people are adopting behavioural science, we see a lot more people doing behavioural science and applying it. I mean, like yourselves and so many other firms. So this is great. Just watching the field grow and build is very satisfying. And not just the academic side, but applied to a practitioner side. And then, of course, all of the social impact that's happening from doing this. That's been really, really satisfying. I used to lose sleep in the early days - because I came from private sector - I used to worry that all of this behavioural science magic will get used for evil, like people doing bad things and manipulating customers and so on. But so far, (knock on wood) I haven't seen it used that way. Even even in the private sector, the stories I hear about, it's usually, you know, something good. It's helping people take up a beneficial product or things like that.

Eric Singler 23:48

Piyush, could give our listeners some advice about infusing behavioural science. You started, but I think as we are all practitioners, it could be helpful to go deeper. If our objective is to instil behavioural science within an organisation, what is your key advice from your big experience?

Piyush Tantia 24:16

Yes. The common model, as we all know, is a kind of a SWAT team or nudge unit type model where you create a team that is specialised in this and they go around the organisation doing this type of work. I think that's a good way to start. And it has been successful for us and so

many others. But ultimately, if they remain separate and they remain a skunkworks on the side, it really doesn't infuse in the organisation, doesn't change how executives and everyday managers are thinking about this. And there's always tension here in large organisations. Like "well is, there's a customer insights group, and then there's a behavioural group, and then there's marketing, and then there's data science and machine learning". And everybody's a separate group. And they're overlapping and often stepping on each other's toes or design thinking. So ultimately, what I think would be fantastic is for these teams to then go back into different functional areas, product areas, business units, and really start infusing this as a way of thinking. Because I do believe that a behavioural perspective and behavioural insights add to marketing and add to UX design - they they add to the way you think about these things that already exist in these organisations. And that's the goal that I'd love to ultimately get to, which is why we launched the Academy. And I know you all do a lot of trainings as well, because we want to get at least a lot of people up to a certain basic fundamental level.

Scott Young 26:09

Just two different thoughts there, I guess. One: yeah, we certainly hear this conversation or debate a little bit about the internal nudge unit, within an organisation versus the individuals within different functions. And it sounds like you're, you're saying maybe it's different stages of the journey where the nudge unit piece, or the internal team might make sense for a while, but ultimately evolve towards that other model.

Piyush Tantia 26:39

Yeah. And we've done projects, where our partners wanted to really adopt behavioural science. And we wound up not setting up a nudge unit separately, but training a few key people within their marketing division or their product management division, because they're the ones really doing this day to day anyway. Sometimes we even skip the Nudge Unit phase and do it that way.

Eric Singler 27:07

And what about Human Resources? Do you think Human Resources is also an area where we could add a lot - applying behavioural science? Hiring, Diversity, Inclusion... even Safety at Work or fighting against stereotypes?

Piyush Tantia 27:31

Yeah, definitely so much to do there. And in some areas, I feel like we know a lot - there is a lot of science, like the Safety at Work. So we've done projects for the Department of Labor here in the US and some of those have involved safety, work safety and compliance there. On the diversity, inclusion, stereotypes... there's so much to do there, but I feel like we're still learning the insights, there's so much more we could do. And even decision-making, executive decision-making: I also feel like there are interesting things to try that we haven't tried around protocols for reducing the group decision making biases and so on. There are so many things to do.

Eric Singler 28:21

Hmm, I think Cass has made some great work in this area of "better group decision", and avoiding some of the specific biases. I remember also a conversation we had some months ago with Faisal Naru about the same topic for infusing behavioural science within organisation. And I think he was very supportive of the idea: rather than to have a specific Nudge Unit, hire people in Marketing or in Human Resources who have this knowledge of behavioural science. So it is a better way to infuse because they work every day in this specific area to infuse behavioural science than having experts within a unique behavioural science team.

Piyush Tantia 29:16

Yeah, exactly. And I see a lot of people doing that, but I see that they have a tendency to go look for a PhD in psychology, like "oh, let's just hire a PhD scientist, and that'll infuse behavioural science", but I think that actually is not always the best solution. And this is also the reason why I never ended up going for a PhD, even though that's how I landed at Ideas42 in the first place. It was Antoinette Schwar who told me this as I was trying to decide whether to go or not. She said that "Look, if you go for a PhD, we will reprogram your brain, we will teach you to think differently than you do now. And you will become less able to do the applied work that you do now". Because Science is so much about generating knowledge, it's a different way of thinking, and it's not so much about applying it. Then in psychology, you also get very focused in a particular area. Whereas - the three of us - our teams are applying

so many different parts of the psychology. So we do need, I think, people who are trained differently for these roles - not PhDs, but people are trained to apply this work, right? It's like engineering is to pure science. So you know, you wouldn't hire a physicist to build consumer electronics - you would hire an electrical engineer or computer scientist,

Eric Singler 30:51

Yeah, I think the best would be to have - in Business School, for example, when you try to become specialised in Human Resources, let's say - to have behavioural science courses and lessons to understand the basic learning at that moment. So you are an expert in HR, in Marketing and so on, but you have understood the basics, or fundamentals of behavioural science, so you apply it as an expert in your area.

Scott Young 31:28

Yeah, I think, when I try to think about our philosophy, it echoes some of what you said: I think we're often trying to bring in people with real detailed expertise or passion in a given area - whether that's financial services, or it's diversity and inclusion, or it's education and teacher training. And then they have the behavioural science layer on top of that. But it's really the detail of knowledge or passion, that I think, is really allowing them to make a difference, because they truly understand an area or a topic very well. And then they're thinking about how to apply behavioural science in that world. And I'm not sure it's mutually exclusive to a PhD, but it's not dependent on it by any means.

Scott Young 32:22

I was curious, a little bit more, about training. Because one thing that we see, and I guess this is the case with a lot of training and teaching is that, you know, people are intuitively interested and excited. You know, behavioural science resonates, it makes sense to them. So it's not difficult to get them in the room, so to speak. And it's not difficult, I think, to get them really excited, you know, whether it's a day or half a day of learning and seeing examples. But as with almost any training, you know, they can run out and then nothing happens the next week. So I was curious what you've been doing to try to help "make it stick" so to speak, or to help folks really start to act on what they learn when they go to an academy or a course or something else?

Piyush Tantia 33:16

The academy courses, we only have them for eight hours or so, right? So we we try to have people reflect during the course as they're learning the psychology on problems that they're facing, either in thier personal life or in their work life. And hopefully, that at least creates a seed in their mind. So by the time they leave the course, they have thought about one of their projects in a different way. And that might create, you know, some opportunity. But I think what's really needed (and we haven't launched this yet - COVID definitely got in the way of that) is some more experiential learning, where while we're teaching the psychology, people are applying it to an actual project that we're then coaching them on. Something that's more like a fellowship, or almost an apprenticeship type programme. And this is how so many of these skills- based certifications work, like Six Sigma, where you only get that green belt or black belt once you've completed a certain type or a certain number of projects. That's ultimately what we want to do with behavioural science. Because we realised early on with the first few years of Ideas42, that there are a lot of skills that you need in addition to the knowledge of behavioural science. And those skills are in how you apply the science and also things like "How do you persuade people to try something new? How do you manage a project? How do you do a complex experiment? How do you handle implementation and experimental design?" And there are all these other things around the behavioural science that you need to know. And the best way to learn those is experientially.

Eric Singler 35:06

Let's speak about COVID, which is one quite big topic. It's especially relevant to us because at the BVA Nudge Unit, we have been working with the French government from the very beginning of the crisis to nudge citizens to adopt new relevant behaviours. And it is a crisis, which would have been solved, thanks to new behaviours and respect and adoption. And now about vaccination, which is also a new, a new behaviour. So we would love to have your perspective about behavioural science and the COVID crisis and how we could help. And what do you think about this?

Piyush Tantia 35:55

Yeah... so much behavioural work to do. So in the early days of the crisis, I would just watch from my window (because I lived on a busy corner), the mask wearing behaviours catching on in New York City. And you could actually see that there was a critical mass - once you saw about 20 to 30% of people walking down the street wearing masks - after that, it just went so quickly. And you could see social norms over time - it was so fantastic. Then in those days, there was no time to do experiments, right? So we just put out the best advice that we could publicly. And we know, for example, we wrote about how for social distancing, you have to actually think about physical environment designed differently and how you physically change the feel, and flow of things like, now what's completely common to us, we don't even notice it, all of these markings of what six feet are. At that time, that wasn't happening. That was one of the things we put out there, what we need to mark things like maybe we need to reorganise grocery stores, because of those crowding around the bread aisle, because everyone was buying bread. And there was a shortage. In March and April, at least in New York, why not put three different displays spread out around the store of bread and things like that.

Piyush Tantia 37:28

Now we've shifted gears to working on a vaccine. And of course, pick up the after vaccine and deliveries; we're partnering with Katie Milkman and others at Penn on a project on that; we're advising various health systems and pharma companies and other types of entities involved in this space, to just, you know, solve problems as quickly as we can. And I think the challenge here for all of us, in COVID, is we're all used to this very rigorous way of doing behavioural science, and applying it. Because it's innovation, we're tinkering, we're running experiments, we're refining them, and then we're rolling things out. We don't have the luxury of doing that now. So it's finding that it's a shift for us in how we do the work, or we have to go out on a limb and give somebody advice to the best of our knowledge, because they need to implement this tomorrow. It's all moving very quickly. And it's more informal in many ways. And sometimes we don't have the measurement of where we write about the idea that we gave someone. So that part is a challenge and different. But yeah, so much going on... I do think that with vaccine hesitancy you know, it's possible that the scarcity principle will help us here, actually, because it's hard to get a vaccine appointment. Is that actually countering

some of the hesitancy for people? Because certainly so far, we're seeing that all the vaccines that are available are getting taken up here.

Eric Singler 39:17

And what are your key ideas to accelerate vaccination? Meaning to encourage people to accept vaccination and maybe also to speak about vaccination in a way which encourages their networks to also be vaccinated?

Piyush Tantia 39:40

Yeah... this is just a disclaimer that this is just my personal opinion: I am not directly working on the project. Some of my colleagues have done a lot more thinking on this. But some of the thoughts I have is that right now I feel like the real barrier is just getting an appointment. There's so much hassle and complexity, at least in the United States. In most places, every state and city has a different policy on who's eligible. Everybody has a different place you go for getting an appointment. And sometimes you have to go to 10 different websites to search for an appointment. So we've had help for technologies (build things like Turbo Vax), that just lets you find a vaccine appointment. So we need to make the process easier, so that at least the people who want to get a vaccine can easily get a vaccine. Because we then need those people to be the messengers, and the source of social norms and social proof for everybody else who might be on the fence, and hesitating, right? So that, I think, is critical. The other is the natural tendency to talk about vivid things more. So if you have horrible side effects, you're going to talk about it. But if you took the vaccine and nothing happened to you, you're probably not going to talk about it that much. You may not even mention that you got the vaccine, right? But if you're sick for two days, everyone's gonna know about it. So how do we counter that? And how do we talk about the millions of people who've taken the vaccine, and have had no side effects whatsoever? My mom just took the first dose of AstraZeneca a couple days ago in India and had no symptoms, which doesn't even have a sore arm - nothing.

Scott Young 41:35

Now, I was just going to say... it almost makes me think that some form of salience would have a lot of power, even if you think of the parallel to voting, and the little 'I Voted' buttons and stickers - just a quick way for people to see that more around them have gotten it without

major problems and so forth. Because you're right; when nothing happens, people aren't likely to talk about it. It's the bad things that they're more likely to share.

Piyush Tantia 42:05

Yeah, I'm glad that media outlets are reporting and tracking the percent of people who've already been vaccinated (one dose and two doses). And I also love to see that 99.8% of those have no side effects that were serious, no complications about a great statistic, whatever that number is, would be great.

Scott Young 42:25

We're starting to reach towards the end of our time, and I wanted to make sure we have a little while to talk about the future of behavioural science, because I know that's an area you very passionate about. You mentioned before, how good you feel about where things have gone over the past 10 years. So I'd love to hear a little more of your thoughts about what's been accomplished. Maybe some of the challenges that you've had and some of the opportunities ahead where you see things going.

Piyush Tantia 42:56

Yeah, I think we're really at a moment in the field where, you know, there's so much opportunity, and we do need to make a conscious shift. So, because we grew out of academia in the early years, the metric of success was "How many experiments did you run?" Or "did you run an experiment?" And then the secondary question was, "well, what happened? What did it mean? Did you actually have impact?" And we now need to measure our success based on impact, I think. Are we actually making change in the world? And that means we may not always get to run an experiment, or we may use other techniques rather than a perfect sort of randomised control trial. I'm really interested in seeing how we apply behavioural science, in product design in systems design in the first place, rather than going and adding on behavioural science to something that already exists to optimise it, right? So how do we reinvent the world rather than simply optimise? Perhaps a mediocre design that could do with some improvement. And how we do that, I think is still emerging. I've been learning as much as I can myself about design and systems design. And I'm collaborating with experts in those fields to try out their methodologies combined with a behavioural science knowledge

base and perspectives. And there are a lot of interesting potential findings, in mapping a system - there are always human actors in the system that are interacting with various things. They might be interacting with information, with institutions, with other people and behavioural sciences... so much to add on precisely how those interactions might happen. And what might change those interactions trends are the barriers or channels. So I think we can add a lot to strategy and systems design and some of this more upstream thinking that goes on and get involved at that stage. So I'm most excited about the potential for that. And really integrating these different innovation disciplines.

Scott Young 45:28

Yeah, I was gonna say, that theme you mentioned, at the beginning about reinventing or designing things better, essentially, as opposed to fixing or optimising is definitely one that we've heard as a somewhat consistent theme from different people leading the field. And, I suspect it may be tied to that conversation we had earlier about instilling and integrating, so it's not 'Project A' or 'Project B' - which is often driven by a problem, or something that's not working - as opposed to having someone on a team, that when they do develop that new service or product, it's built into that thinking, whether it's conscious or subconscious,

Piyush Tantia 46:15

Yeah, it has to be infused in the R&D step, rather than after the fact. And that means that we need more sustained commitment and funding. So much of this work is funded on a short project basis. And to some extent, we've sold these things as a quick cheap fix. That is now coming back to bite us because people say, "Oh, but you said this was fast. Now you're saying you want a five year innovation/invention process". So there is a bit of a mind set change we have to make (a reversal also) in our buyers minds about how this could work in other ways.

Scott Young 47:03

One other area that did interest me - and I'd love to hear your perspective, because you're perhaps coming at it from a slightly different angle - is: public-private partnerships to drive innovation and address some real core problems or challenges. Are you seeing a big deal in that tied to behavioural science? Or is it much more siloed? Where you're seeing NGOs or governments, and not so much private sector?

Piyush Tantia 47:31

I don't have as much visibility into private sector - I think you both are more expert in that than I am. And that's also perhaps because in private sector, things are generally more proprietary and no one gets published. But in the COVID vaccine work, we're partnering with pharma companies and pharmacy chains, but also government health systems. And everybody's trying to solve this together. It's that classic "How do you solve in-group out-group problems?" You have some common problem that all the groups want to solve. So COVID, in that sense, has given us this boost of joining together and solving things. And I'd love to see more of that. Because I think - as we know - the context matters a lot. And every aspect of the context matters. But it's not controlled by just NGOs, or just governments or just private sector: everybody has a part to play.

Eric Singler 48:34

I would like just to ask a question to [you] Piyush regarding the future of behavioural science. [Do] you have any perspective regarding behavioural science, artificial intelligence and big data, because some of us think it could be something very important with a lot of challenges, but also big opportunities.

Piyush Tantia 48:58

Yeah, I think there's a lot of opportunity. Many of my colleagues, including Sendhil have been doing a lot of work on the intersection of these two for the last several years, and we have many projects on it. So I'm not an expert - this is going to be my sort of naive, beginner's take on the machine learning traction. Probably the most intuitive application is that right now, all our behavioural interventions are one size fits all. But with machine learning, we can target them, we can more quickly figure out which type of interventions work for which subgroups of people. The more data we have, the more sample sizes we have, the more we can do that type of work. There's also the adoption of machine learning algorithms. So in many cases, the machine learning algorithm is a support to an expert decision maker, right? So one of the projects we've done is helping judges adopt a machine learning output that helps them decide whether to set bail for somebody or not set bail. Or what is the probability that this person will not show up to court or the probability that they'll commit another crime if they're

released? And algorithms do very well, they're predicting that but then there are, of course, also expert judgement effects. But lots of behavioural issues come up there, as you can imagine that go up: maybe I habitually do my decision making a certain way. Or maybe my identity gets attacked, because I'm an expert. Why should I rely on this algorithm? And it's a difficult decision on when to override the algorithm, and when not to and that has lots of behavioural challenges. So I think that that's where these things come together as well. There's consumer adoption of artificial intelligence. So will people ever be comfortable in a self driving car? What are all the behavioural issues around that? And how do you design for that? So yeah, there are lots of interesting things to work on.

Eric Singler 51:14

Thanks a lot, Piyush, again, for joining us today. Is there anything you'd like to leave our listeners with? Perhaps where can they find out more about Ideas42 and its work?

Piyush Tantia 51:31

Yeah, thank you. Yes, we have a lot of information on our website. It's just www.ideas42.org. Follow us on Twitter: it's just @ideas42 - those are probably the best sources. We also partner with you all and many others on the blog "Behavioral Scientist", that's a great resource. And then similarly, another sub-consortium resource, it's called bhub.org, where we put up some simple tools for practitioners to use behavioural science quickly. We also put up behavioural interventions that have worked in multiple places. So practitioner can go read about them there and try to adapt and adopt them.

Eric Singler 52:18

Thanks a lot, Piyush. It was really a great conversation and an honour and a pleasure for us to welcome you in this episode.

Piyush Tantia 52:28

Likewise. I really enjoyed the conversation also, especially picking your brains. [Inaudible] it was great.

BVA Nudge Unit 52:36

B.E. Good! A podcast by the BVA Nudge Unit.