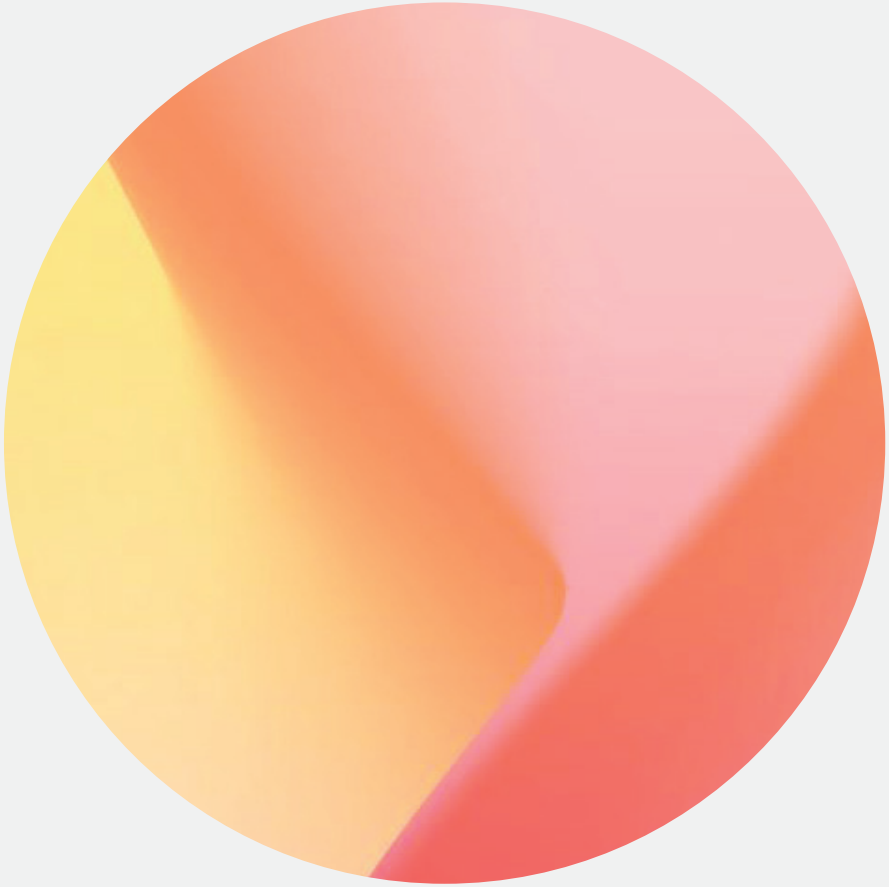

Disha Collab '23



beSciGHTS

Experiences from three years of applied behavioral science in India



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Abbreviations, Acronyms and Glossary

ASHA	Accredited Social Health Activist
AWC	Anganwadi Centres
Bahu	Daughter-in-law
BASIC	Behavior, Analysis, Strategies, Intervention, and Change
Brahmin	priestly caste
CIFF	Children's Investment Fund Foundation
DDDT	Define, Diagnose, Design, and Test
didi	community health worker
gram panchayat	village council
HCD	Human-Centred Design
IDEAS	Integrate, Design, Assess, and Share
INAP	India Newborn Action Plan
IFA	Iron and Folic Acid
MFI	Microfinance Institution
OCB	Other Backward Classes (official Indian government caste term)
sarpanch	elected leader of a village council
SHG	Self-help Groups
SBC	Social and Behavior Change
ST	Scheduled tribes (officially designated group of people)
WEE	Women's Economic Empowerment
WEIRD	Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic; a concept developed by Joseph Henrich et al.

The literature contains various definitions and explanations of terms we adopt in this compendium. Our index, based largely on how we have defined concepts and methods in our work, is intended to clarify the concept behind the terms we use and thereby build a shared understanding.

1. Agency: The ability to identify and define goals, make choices that matter to them, and participate in public life.
2. Awareness-intention gap: Individuals have an intention to do something but don't always act in the interest of fulfilling that intention.
3. Bargaining power: The relative ability of an individual to exert influence over the decision-making process and allocation of resources.
4. Behavioral design: A lens that uses design to shape or influence behavior. Human-centered design is an approach that puts people at the center of the intervention development process.
5. Behavioral games: Experimental instruments that typically measure cooperation (e.g. Ultimatum Game), fairness (e.g. Dictator Game), and/or reciprocity (e.g. Trust Game).
6. Collectivist societies: A social organisation that emphasizes and promotes cohesion and needs of the group as a whole over individual desires.
7. Commitment device: A choice that an individual makes, which serves to limit the choices available in the future to those that serve longer-term goals.
8. Conflict: A state of incompatible or opposing needs, interests, or demands.
9. Context: Refers to the particular setting or situation in which individuals make decisions and behave.
10. Culture: Refers to the behaviors, beliefs, and values shared within a particular social life and distinguishes one group from another group.

11. Feminist approach: A human rights-based and inclusive approach that aims to understand gender inequality and achieve equality and equity based on gender.
12. Framing effects: Individuals make decisions about information based on how the information is presented.
13. Gender roles: Behavior that is considered to be acceptable by cultural norms, based on a person's sex.
14. Generalizability: The degree to which the findings of a study can be applied to a different contexts.
15. Heuristic: Mental shortcuts that allow individuals to reach immediate, short-term goals and solve problems in a quick and efficient manner.
16. Identity priming: A technique used to influence behavior by using subtle cues to emphasize a certain group membership or being a certain type of person.
17. Intra-household dynamics: A framework that considers how forces within a household, such as the roles between men and women, have an effect on and is also affected by decision-making.
18. Loss aversion: A tendency for people to perceive a real or potential loss as more psychologically severe than a gain of an equivalent value.
19. Mental models: A concept or worldview that represents the surrounding world and supports in understanding and predicting it.
20. Messenger effects: Individuals are influenced by communication based on whether the information is provided by someone who is known and trusted.
21. Nudge: A technique that leverages easy and low-cost tweaks in the design of the decision environment to influence behavior.
22. Outgroup bias: Also sometimes known as in-group–out-group bias, refers to favoring members of one's own group over members from other groups.
23. Participatory approach: The process of involving people who are directly affected by the issue being tackled in specific aspects of the diagnosis, design and evaluation process.
24. Power hierarchies: A ranked ordering of individuals or groups based on levels of respect accorded to them.
25. Representative/diverse sample: A subset of a population that, in

composition, accurately reflects the characteristics of the larger population.

26. Self-report bias: A type of error that results from relying on people to describe their feelings, thoughts, or behavior, rather than measuring these directly.

27. Social desirability bias: The tendency to conceal attitudes and/or behaviors that feel less socially acceptable and express more acceptable attributes.

28. Social influence: Refers to changes in individual attitudes and behavior that other individuals cause, even with their implied or imagined presence.

29. Social norms / Gender norms: Socially defined principles that govern the behavior of individuals in any given group or community. Gender norms, by defining typical and appropriate actions for women and men, restrict one's gender identity.

30. Status quo bias: The preference for maintaining the current state of things and opposing forces that may change them.

31. Theory of change: A method used to explain how and why an intervention(s) is expected to cause a desired change in a specific context.

32. WEIRD contexts: People from Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic societies who represent only a small slice of the world's population but a large chunk of research samples.

33. Women's empowerment: The process in which women improve their sense of self-worth and strengthen the ability to make their own choices.

Foreword

Different views of behavioral science in India

By Krittika Gorur and Aditya Jagati

As students, we didn't enjoy physics. The knotty equations and cryptic Greek symbols were overwhelming; calculating the force a monkey needed to climb a tree felt absurd. And yet, we remained intrigued by the quest to answer intellectual problems.

We still are.

Many years later, we are confronting a similar level of abstraction, practicing behavioral science as economists and psychologists—trying to grasp the irrational human mind, navigating the bottomless world of biases—to find answers to the world's most pressing social challenges. Echoing the intrigue of the physical sciences, human behavior continues to amaze us. And we are lucky: this interest comes at the right time. We are inspired by the global gathering of momentum for the field of applied behavioral science, which seeks to use rigorous behavioral research to help design programs and policies that are beneficial to and in the clear and articulated interest of those they are designed to support.

Yet, the global trend also brings a contradiction into sharp focus: behavioral science also teaches us about human difference and that context matters. This means that applying behavioral science in India will require an acknowledgement of idiosyncrasies, of uniqueness and of difference. Global behavioral science continued to be based on an extremely biased data set, with research respondents from non-Western contexts constituting a very small minority.¹ As Busara India, we are excited to continue to nuance the global interest through the prism of India and to continue to collect data that allows us to ask why people behave the way they do in an understudied context.

Busara's journey in India

Busara's story started in Kenya in 2011 and expanded to India in 2019. After three years of applying behavioral science in India, making discoveries, stumbling and then learning from our failures, and striving for continued

¹ Henrich, J. (2020). *The WEIRDest people in the world: How the West became psychologically peculiar and particularly prosperous*. Penguin UK.



Through personal reflections and different looking glasses, beSciGHTS has become our unfiltered, polaroid-esque manuscript: as the images and insights appear in front of our eyes, we continue to shake the product to see what else might develop, what further reflection we need to pursue.

growth, we took a moment to pause. In this moment of reflection, spurred on by Dhvani Yagnaraman, we time travelled to our collective project experiences while on a hill in Uttarakhand. We take this opportunity to reflect on our germinating library of behavioral insights, and to interrogate our responsibility as behavioral scientists in India, with all her pluralities and diversities.

This curated compendium offers a glimpse of our work across 15 projects conducted in ten states of India—we interrogated our work, revisited mainstream assumptions, and learned to accept the uneasy feeling at times that the path we took might not have been the ideal one.

This compendium encases reflections and voices from a team of early-career applied researchers who disentangle nuance from generalities and articulate the opportunities and challenges in practicing applied behavioral science in India.

Five lenses on behavioral science: binoculars, microscope, wide-angle lens, bifocals and reactions

Through this work, we learned that to understand how behavioral science might work in India requires developing different perspectives. To become an astute observer of challenges, learnings and idiosyncracies requires different lenses, angles and a changing focus.

The first viewing implement we use are binoculars: they bring something closer and into view that the human eye alone cannot perceive, things that are omnipresent, but hidden to plain sight. Power is such a thing, argue Aditya Jagati and Aanchal Sharma. It is part of India's character that power is always present in every interaction and that power is imbued through certain characteristics. Varsha Ashok illustrates how this plays out in research. What does it mean for researchers to impose power over the research process and participants? Particularly so when there is a discrepancy between what an often top-down academic approach demands of a research process and what a practitioner wanting to implement a program needs.

After bringing power closer and making it visible through

binoculars, we employ a microscope. This implement specifies our gaze to closely examine the tools we use to study the finer nuances of human behavior. By honing in on broader family dynamics, Shriyam Gupta introduces the concept of the micro-society, which teaches us that when looking to understand even the most private of decision-making between husband and wife, it is necessary to realise that more than two people need to be under the microscope for this inquiry. But the microscope also reminds us, as Ananya Jalan and Gitanksh Sethi outline, that such a detailed look continues to be influenced by power: developing a behavioral science perspective in India will require a commitment to understanding why people offer certain stories about themselves; and how this influences the type of data that is used for analysis.

The microscope is necessary, but also dangerous unless its gaze is supplemented by a wide-angle lens that takes in the ecosystem in which a behavior change program is implemented. Pooja Gupta uses the latter to ask, with a broad vision, why family planning interventions designed to empower women might not yield the desired change. She argues that programmatic underperformance is not a design flaw, but a profound misunderstanding of what choice and agency mean for Indian women—or how they define empowerment.

We switch to a wide-angle lens in the third section to dig deeper into this quandary by taking us through lived experiences in India, unravelling what choice and agency in the family planning space are, and discussing why it is important to rethink traditional definitions of success. Jaspreet Singh and Ritika Divekar do just that by questioning how the success of a program or an intervention ought to be defined or measured, when it is put into a greater context of pursuing social change.

As humans go through life, and learn, their vision changes and requires different types of support. Bifocal glasses—one set of glasses that can help see in the distance as well as focus on everything close—are the fourth viewing implement we deploy. Behavioral science allows us, writes Kaavya Arakoni, to simultaneously grapple with issues

that seem near and afar. Understanding how the sheer variability in geography, social identities, and historical contexts housed in India can produce something like generalizable insights will always require this double take through the far- and near-sighted parts of the glasses.

Yet, nothing we see here is static: things change while we look at them because the context changes. Just like the sunlight darkens the clear glasses of a reaction lens, a vision for behavioral science in India might look very different given the constraints of what Kriti Chouhan and Aanchal Sharrma call the supply side of behavioral interventions: the policymakers and practitioners who seek to offer an intervention but lack the resource and political room to maneuver to respond to research evidence.

Crucially and conclusively, Krittika Gorur reminds us that the view changes if the nuance of light changes and that advancing applied behavioral science in India means embracing the wider slice of human experiences in India. If there is a consensus approach to behavioral science in India, what could it look like? How might it need adaptation from what is considered the Western-influenced standard? In asking these profound and big questions, we commit to more learning, building our knowledge and balancing the global trends in behavioral science with the Indian context by building specific interventions from scratch.

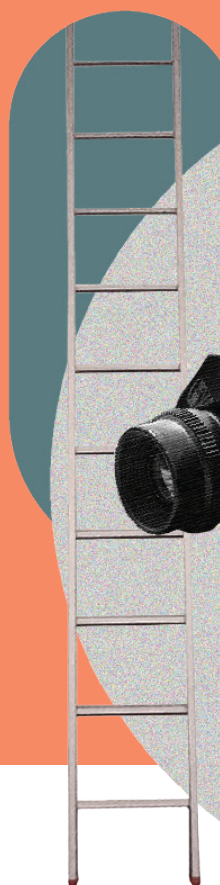
Discovery of views: the way forward for growing behavioral science in India

Our work continues to steer us headfirst into exhilarating learning, prickly problems and new difficulties. We share all of these with the reader, often without offering decisive answers or prescriptive solutions.

Through personal reflections and different looking-glasses, beSciGHTS has become our unfiltered, polaroid-esque manuscript: as the images and insights appear in front of our eyes, we continue to shake the product to see what else might develop, what further reflection we need to pursue. beSciGHTS is also an invitation. To talk about the direction that applied behavioral science wants to and ought to take in India. To jointly take a peek through the

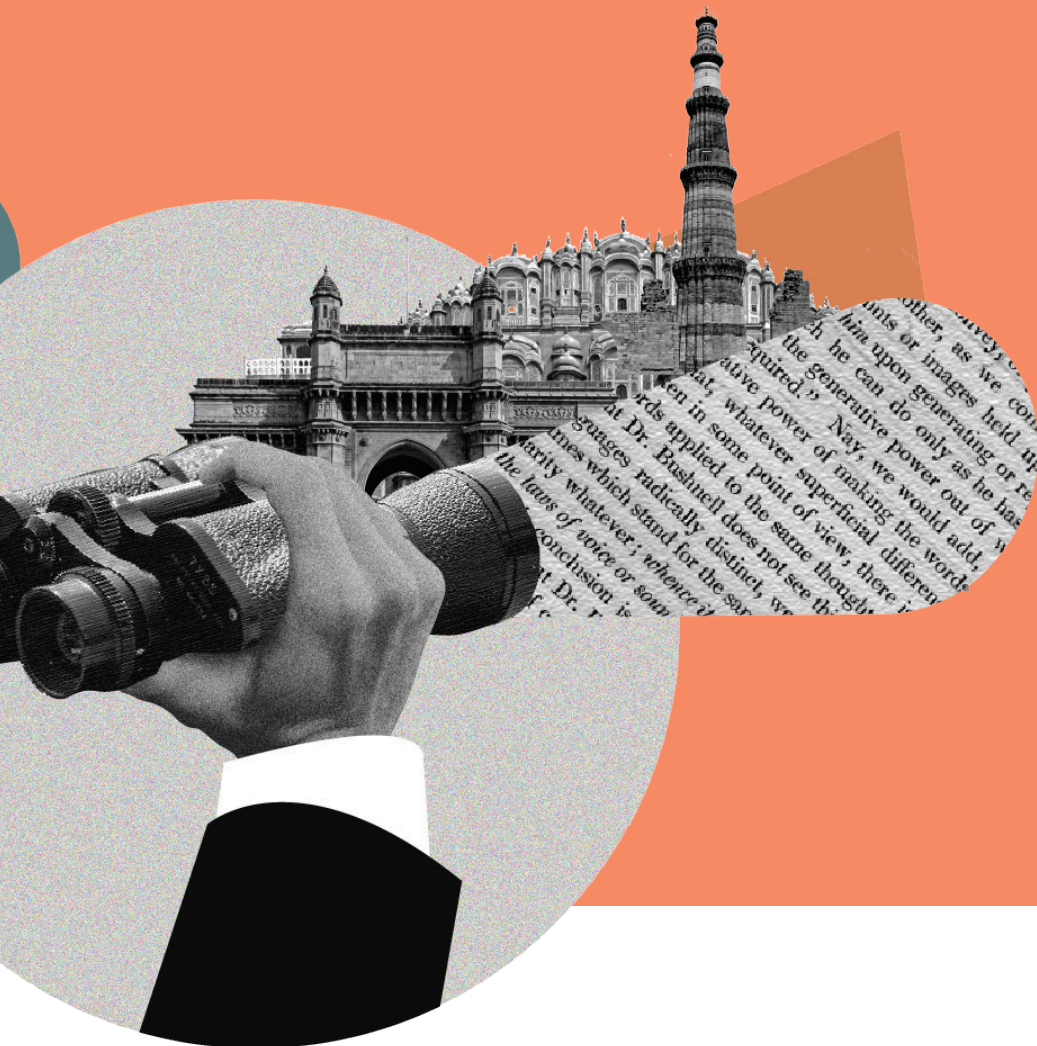
different looking-glasses and develop a refined vision together. And finally, to embark on a journey that started with being intrigued by abstract intellectual problems back in physics classes which today forms part of an urgent path toward social change that benefits all.

1



Binoculars

Sharpening the distant view of power and research



Auditing the invisible clothes of power

By Aditya Jagati
and Aanchal Sharrma



We do not always see the role of power as it paddles away under the surface and yet it is responsible for visible outcomes."

A power lens could take any form, from a dedicated check to a mere reminder to be conscious about exploring notions of power while examining the next research question or engaging with a respondent."

Power is invisible. That is what makes it potent. Its ability to slither and embed itself into existing (often taken-for-granted) structures conceals power from plain sight and perception. Without binoculars, power can remain elusive yet always on the horizon. Does making it visible sound scary and complicated? It is. An example will make it easier to understand what happens, however, when we fix the binoculars on power.

In India, imagine a person with four characteristics: heterosexual, male, upper caste, middle class (having a white-collar job). In isolation, each of these demographic features represents an innocuous characteristic of an individual. However, when combined in the layers of a single person, these four characteristics become perhaps the most powerful set of attributes in the Indian social atmosphere. The power of an upper caste, white-collared, heterosexual man in India is synonymous with the much-talked-about and explored white-man privilege in western countries. This power through characteristics is also a multiplier of security and confidence and instills in the power holder a sense of invincibility. Much like the privilege of the white male, that of the upper caste-het-middle-class male is an invisible and weightless knapsack of special social and economic provisions. It comes with a general reluctance to acknowledge the deprivation and disadvantage of others that might not be like oneself.

With privilege comes power. We have often seen or at least heard about how the *sarpanch* (elected leader) of a *gram panchayat* (village council) extends favors to his relatives (for example, in a road construction tender process). We have listened to stories about an ASHA worker selectively excluding lower caste communities during a health check-up camp. All examples tend to go unchallenged, as they are expressions of power invisibly rested in a hierarchy. Such power is difficult to challenge.

To write about these stories is not only meant to add material to our repository of insights but to acknowledge a deleterious tendency in social research to foreground individual, discernable acts of hierarchy and authority and push into the shadows the power nestled within the invisible systems. Power, in that state of invisibility, displays its potency by conferring dominance in different ways over different groups.

Having identified this phenomenon, a need for a social science unveiling process is brought to notice, that lifts power's invisibility cloak through a process of reflection and collaboration.

Why does it deserve the limelight in India?

Not all invisible things need to be unpacked in minute detail. Love might benefit from its own mystique, for

¹ McIntosh, P. (2003). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. In S. Plous (Ed.), *Understanding prejudice and discrimination* (pp. 191–196). McGraw-Hill.

instance. But in its invisible state, power can discreetly sabotage many efforts at social change. This is especially true in the context of India where power structures have several opportunities to be cloaked in benign forms—from devotion towards the supreme power, to acquiescence to hierarchy, or an unquestionable acceptance of parental guidance.

For those of us who work at the intersection of research and policy, in an effort to support social change that is beneficial for those at the bottom of the power hierarchy, acknowledging power and its many manifestations is crucial. Policies seeking to empower people who do not have power or asking how and when to redistribute unequal power need to devise special 'power binoculars' through which the ways power is exercised can be seen. These power binoculars could act as a constant reminder, particularly for us as researchers, that research, through its ability to replicate, can also replicate and reinforce existing power structures. This can take different forms. Research can fail to account for power in its varied forms when inferring and recommending certain paths of action. Or in the research process, researchers might not share the power they hold through their education, resources and privileged position that allows them to ask questions. Researchers who hold on to their power over their research participants might create a narrative that is controlled and directed by the researchers themselves.

Again, this might be a process in which the control of power remains invisible because power manifests itself in different and concealed ways. Before digging

into this aspect, we must confess that our understanding of power before engaging with it through the research binoculars was rather limited. It looked much like Machiavelli's version of power, which evoked images of force, coercion, deception and manipulation. As researchers in India, we would like to move away from this notion, and explore with you (the readers) an idea of power as not only being strategically acquired but also given and shared. This constitutes, in a way, a reminder to ourselves of the need to move away from the dominant concepts of power, shaped by cultural and historical events in Europe and the U.S. To use Machiavelli's blueprint of power and map it onto India (or maybe even more broadly the Global South, for that matter) would be a restricted approach.

How is it imbued

Power manifests itself in multi-dimensional, flexible and often complex forms; it is as diverse as the Indian context itself. Telling stories of the diversity of power enables us to contextualize concepts that might be otherwise difficult to fit due to their pre-defined constructs. The following sketches, drawn from our research, convey the various incarnations of power.

Malti, a mother-in-law, is regarded as a role model in her village. Her virtue is that she commands respect from her *bahu*—her daughter-in-law. In the past year alone, she decided that her *bahu* should focus on the well-being of the household

by taking care of the chores rather than pursue further education. The power Malti holds, however, was not always present. Twenty-two years ago, Malti herself was a young daughter-in-law with aspirations. Her mother-in-law back then decided Malti's future on Malti's behalf and ensured that her dreams took a back seat.

Today, Malti had a choice: she could have let her past disappointments turn into empathetic energy towards her daughter-in-law by allowing her to pursue her dreams or follow the footsteps of her mother-in-law and replicate history. She chose the latter not because it was an easier choice, but because she wanted a taste of power after a long period of feeling powerless. Malti's decision to exercise her power in this way cannot be understood as a point-in-time case but rather as an experience over three decades. It teaches us that power changes depending on who a person is in relation to another and that power is not static but rather a flow that constantly changes.

Not too far from Malti, in the Dholpur district of Rajasthan, Shobha was also waiting for her rise to the ranks of a valued household member. She saw her cousin recently give birth to a healthy young boy. This new status meant that the cousin now decided which hospitals she and her child visit and what the household eats. Shobha envies her cousin's power—attained by giving birth to a child—and it is because of this that most knocks of family-planning-promoting ASHA workers at her door go unanswered. As Pooja Gupta elaborates in this volume,² power often latches itself to the social roles and identities of the individual, which are

² Refer to page number 44

ever-changing. These changes can take many forms through events or identity shifts: they occur when someone born into a brahmin family marries into a different caste. Power changes when someone from a Muslim family gets elected as a government representative or—as is in the case of Shobha's cousin—when a daughter, wife, or sister becomes a mother.

Sometimes power is a function of age and the notions that age attaches to it. Most villagers blindly trust Geetaben in her small village near Vadodara—not because she is an Ayurvedic doctor but because she, as they said, “has seen more than 80 years of life.” Hordes of people queue up to discuss their health and other problems with Geetaben, which sometimes leaves a hint of insecurity amongst those officially elected to have power and authority, such as the ruling *sarpanch* of the *gram panchayat*.

After graduating with a Master's degree from Pune, Anuj got married in his hometown of Satara district of Maharashtra. He discusses every matter with his wife, including family planning, expenditure, savings, and future career plans. It did not matter to Anuj that his wife only studied till grade eight but that she made valuable contributions to their joint decisions. Anuj used his power that had many sources—his education, his gender—to nourish his wife's confidence levels. Power thus can be shared, distributed or induced onto other people.

These sketches and what they tell us about the various ways in which power plays out merely scratch the surface of the attempt to understand power. The role of power is deeper than the manipulative version of Machiavelli and the obvious granting through official titles. Yet as researchers, we often fail to go beyond the obvious. We perceive Malti as an uneducated mother-in-law who does not value education for her daughter-in-law. We recommend blasting Shobha with multiple reminder messages to adopt family planning. We thoughtlessly categorize someone official like the *sarpanch* to be a better channel for delivering interventions as compared to Geetaben who is educated and a doctor but elderly. We do not recognize Anuj as a supportive or caring husband and how his manner gives power to his wife. We do not always see the role of power as it paddles away under the surface and yet it is responsible for visible outcomes.

The episodes detailed here not only make us acknowledge the strength of the diverse and underlying forms of power but also shed light on our limitations as researchers. True to its nature, power often goes unnoticed or unquestioned. By extension, this means that sometimes while the interventions or the solutions behavioral researchers design to overcome an identified behavioral barrier might succeed in achieving efficacy (even in the most statistically robust way), they might not hit the right underlying mechanism. For instance, in one of our programs, giving digital aids like a mobile phone to women did increase their participation in an activity, which was seen as a sign of increased empowerment. However, soon the husbands started to feel alienated and insecure which

reflected in a worsened relationship for the couple. This side-effect of the intervention could have been prevented had the intra-spousal and broader household power dynamics been given more salient treatment in the way that Shriyam Gupta suggests in this volume. »

Research that aids in understanding a context and in identifying behavioral barriers and enablers needs to be participatory to capture those dynamics. And yet, working to the true spirit of participatory research remains a challenge because the researchers involved are not just often biased, but also often due to their own contexts not able to see the invisible forces of power. And yet, despite the researcher's blind spot, it is also the duty of research to make power visible.

But how? By firmly fixating the binoculars on power and thus introducing a power lens. We intentionally call this—in a somewhat fuzzy way—a lens rather than a defined toolkit. Many of the tools employed by behavioral researchers are likely prone to not pick up the obscure nature of power.

The call to action then, is to identify a need for better contextualisation and to encourage a perspective on power in its entirety rather than in the most easily identifiable parts—for examples, those described earlier: while independently stand-alone characteristics might not be strong enough to elicit a specific kind of behavior, Rajiv, a 28-year-old, Brahmin boy living in Delhi and employed in a multinational firm, might feel powerful enough to drive past a red light and

believe that he will get away with any unintended consequences. It is then up to us to apply a power lens to reflect on what empowers Rajiv in this instance. Do we need a gender analysis? Understand his social networks or his self-image? Is a historical look at his experience that he can get away with it required? What angle precisely might constitute the power lens is a work in progress—one that the behavioral science community in India has to jointly undertake. A power lens could take any form from a dedicated check to a mere reminder to be conscious about exploring notions of power while examining the next research question or engaging with a respondent.

How should we pay attention to it?

Besides generating more informed and evolved insights, removing the invisible clothes of power also helps us be better researchers by understanding the true meaning and practice of participatory research. The idea behind participatory research is about sharing of power, if not fully letting go of it. The ability to view participants as co-researchers rather than just sources for inputs to feed into the research owned by the researcher forms an essential part of this exercise.

This is in no way easy and many known behavioral biases stand in the way of this change. Power holders suffer from loss aversion and might lack trust in other people's ability to understand and navigate power. Principal investigators might not fully feel confident to fully rely on field officers.

3 Refer to page number 28

Research agendas might be shaped in various ways to respond to the power of funders.

However, having some questions about power in our research arsenal, and continuously replenishing our repository of insights, is a great first step. This minimalist approach might break open some of the continued manifestations of power and how we express it. Does it matter, for example, in the exertion of power if researchers refer to participants as beneficiaries, end-users, customers or co-researchers? What is a comfortable balance between trusting local partners and relinquishing our control over them? Does the attire we wear when conducting research play a role in establishing power dynamics between researcher and research participants? An attempt to answer these questions and in the process shift towards understanding what it might take to truly share power will not only help us debias the overall research approach but also equip us with a vision of society and social circumstances that is clearer and sharpened through the power lens.

As you read through the reflections in this first edition of beSciGHTS, a power lens will allow you first glimpses of the various manifestations of power. While each contribution explores a different facet of our experience in growing applied behavioral science in India (and they are not all explicitly about power), donning a power lens might, we hope, help enrich the reading experience.



The comfort of prescription Refining interventions through iteration



By Varsha Ashok



What agency means to women who belong to the Indian upper class will not translate to an urban migrant population working in a garment factory.

Qualitative research will raise important issues of viability and ethics that will require us to revisit our design. It in some ways is the set of binoculars that we need to bring something closer and into sharp focus that we might otherwise not spot on the horizon.

Located in the northern part of the southern state of Karnataka, almost in the Malnad region of the Deccan plateau, the district of Hubli is a small rebellion to the neatly packaged version of India we often use to explain the county. Once a thriving industrial center in colonial India, Hubli today holds a relatively more modest commercial economy. In one of these factories—which mass-produces garments for export—I sit across from a woman who sews collars on shirts five days a week.

“Why?” she asks me.

“Why would I want to get my salary in two portions? I’m used to getting it once. I’m comfortable that way.”

With a distinct feeling of discomfort, I look down at my questionnaire. I’m at a loss for what to say next.

I understand her preference for what she knows: receiving her salary as one lump sum. I understand it because I wish I was at this moment in a similar situation of being comforted by familiarity. But the project that brought me to Hubli did not follow the clear path towards intervention design taught in classrooms and conventionally practiced in applied research, which is to establish a knowledge foundation first and test assumptions and questions before starting to collect data and administer questionnaires. Instead, my list of questions was based on shaky footing, uncertified by popular approval. My questions had put me on an unknown

path, fervently wishing for the familiar.

What we mean when we talk about behavioral design

In behavioral design and research, we are inundated by acronyms: BASIC, DDDT, IDEAS— all tell us of gold standard prescriptions. These follow the familiar path of identifying and defining a problem in a population, asking if it is prevalent enough to tackle, designing an intervention to address it, and testing for effectiveness. The field of applied social research has intervention design down to a science. It found what works well and streamlined it.

But is there a playbook for behavioral design? As any practitioner will tell you, solutions are often the results of bespoke methods. I argue that good behavioral design means that we sometimes need to set prescription aside and step away from the comfort of the acronyms we know like the back of our hands—these are the acronyms that gives us comfort and power of knowledge. Is breaking away, however, a guaranteed way to solve a problem? No. But a willingness to go against what is held dear is what underpins our intentions as researchers and is in the very essence of scientific questioning.

What does going against the norm mean for research? In this article, I look at the rules and ask: have we, as a community of researchers, fallen prey to status quo bias? Are we seeking social desirability by falling in line with descriptive norms? Are we so

1 Mummah, S. A., Robinson, T. N., King, A. C., Gardner, C. D., & Sutton, S. (2016). IDEAS (Integrate, Design, Assess, and Share): a framework and toolkit of strategies for the development of more effective digital interventions to change health behavior. *Journal of medical Internet research*, 18(12), e5927.

loss averse that we fear losing the comfort prescription brings? In doing this, I present an approach to behavioral design rooted in a love of inquiry and in the courage to take a step back—maybe put on our binoculars and remove ourselves a bit—when we as researchers exert our powers.

So, how did I find myself in this conundrum, aggravated by how my questionnaire had elicited a perfectly valid pushback from my research respondent?

I had arrived at the garment factory armed with an intervention designed born from grant requirements and notions of existing capacity. The idea was to increase women's agency by improving their financial liquidity through a flexible advance on their monthly salaries. A bespoke system was to be built into the factory's administrative framework to allow women to request advances on their salaries up to the number of days worked in a month.

The intervention relied heavily on desk review and faith that it would all work out as planned in the end and that the women would think this a good idea. This meant having to ask questions and receive answers that disregarded the ideas that were already greenlit. Asking the women took us back to square one and for me created the exhausting thought: "What am I going to do now that these women aren't in favor of a salary advance?"

Putting problems into perspective

Luckily, I write this reflection in retrospect. The answer to my problem required me to (re)define what I meant when I proclaimed that financial liquidity improved women's agency. My rethinking started with the simple—now quite obvious to me—epiphany that agency means more than just one thing. Reviewing the literature taught me that agency can mean making independent financial decisions, taking calls about child care and healthcare, or having a say in how the household is run.² It can also mean increased mobility and talking with spouses about finances. The important takeaway here is that expected outcomes should be contextualised by always asking: what does the concept mean to the people I am talking to? What agency means to women who belong to the Indian upper class will not translate to an urban migrant population working in a garment factory.

There are several ways to contextualise expected outcomes. The most insightful is qualitative research. In our study, we prepared a resource mapping exercise that nudged women to think deeply about their cash inflows and outflows over the previous month.³ In this context of household budgeting, the research team was able to segue into more sensitive questions about household dynamics and inter partner

2 Chang, W., Diaz-Martin, L., Gopalan, A., Guarnieri, E., Jayachandran, S., & Walsh, C. (2020). What works to enhance women's agency: Cross-cutting lessons from experimental and quasi-experimental studies. *J-PAL*. Working Paper.

3 Fayard, A.-L. (n.d.). *Method in Action: Resource Flow*. designkit.org. Retrieved from <https://www.designkit.org/stories/251>

relationships related to money. Another factor to look out for is metrics that are already being measured; if something is already being measured, it means there are stakeholders that care about how it performs. Our research study hypothesised that an increase in liquidity would reduce financial stress. With less stress, women would be more productive at work and display reduced absenteeism and attrition. Garment factories already track line productivity, and attendance and attrition rates. In showing that these metrics are better after an intervention, it is more likely to garner stakeholder buy-in.

The population chooses you

Finding and justifying a population in which to implement and test a novel intervention can be tricky. Most often, it is strongly guided by factors like accessibility, budgets and logistics. For example, our project focused on female employees in a garment factory due to partnership agreements and grant awards. There is a certain aspect of power involved here where even in the choice of population, we as researchers reconstituted certain hierarchies. Yet, 'women who work in garment factories in India' still required some narrowing down. There are different courses of action here— we may decide to interview a sample of women who work in factories from different states, interview stakeholders familiar with varied contexts, or gather preliminary findings from people who are more reachable. In our project, we chose to do the latter; a population

of rural migrants in a factory in Hubli was approached for initial research. What is important here is the formative qualitative work we conducted.

Qualitative research can give detailed and nuanced answers to the questions we ask and, more importantly, points us toward those we do not. It will also tell us, whether we like it or not, all the reasons an intervention won't work. It may be an issue of logistics, a barrier that was not accounted for, or simply that the population does not like what is being proposed. Qualitative research will raise important issues of viability and ethics that will require us to revisit our design. In some ways it is the set of binoculars that we need to bring something closer and into sharp focus that we might otherwise not spot on the horizon.

Is there a right population to research?

It is tempting to continue the search for a population that 'fits' (i.e.: one that does not challenge initial hypotheses and our Big Great Idea, so to speak). While almost nothing can be said against gaining as much insight into context as possible, it is important to take a step back and deliberate. Are we exerting our power as researchers by doing more rounds of qualitative work to find a group of people who react positively to the intervention we would like to propose? Are we increasing the criteria for selection and narrowing the final reach at each iteration? Given the relative freedom with which research can define a population, is it impactful if the intervention only benefits a

few? The takeaway: make sure people are heard when they say they don't like something and, with this context, ask 'can my intervention do with some tweaks?'

A love of inquiry

A lot of the work is circling back and revamping: do our hypotheses make sense with the new information we have gained after we used our binoculars? Might increased financial liquidity result in outcomes we have not considered? At what point in the journey maps of women in garment factories and in what form would our intervention be most effective?

In the many frameworks available, we think about iteration as a part of design. But it might be more effectively applied to the development of the intervention as a whole. This is reflective of the iterative process that needs to be employed. When intervening starts with a clearly defined problem and an idea of what outcomes look like, there are frameworks that help streamline the process. There is no rule when you are testing something new.

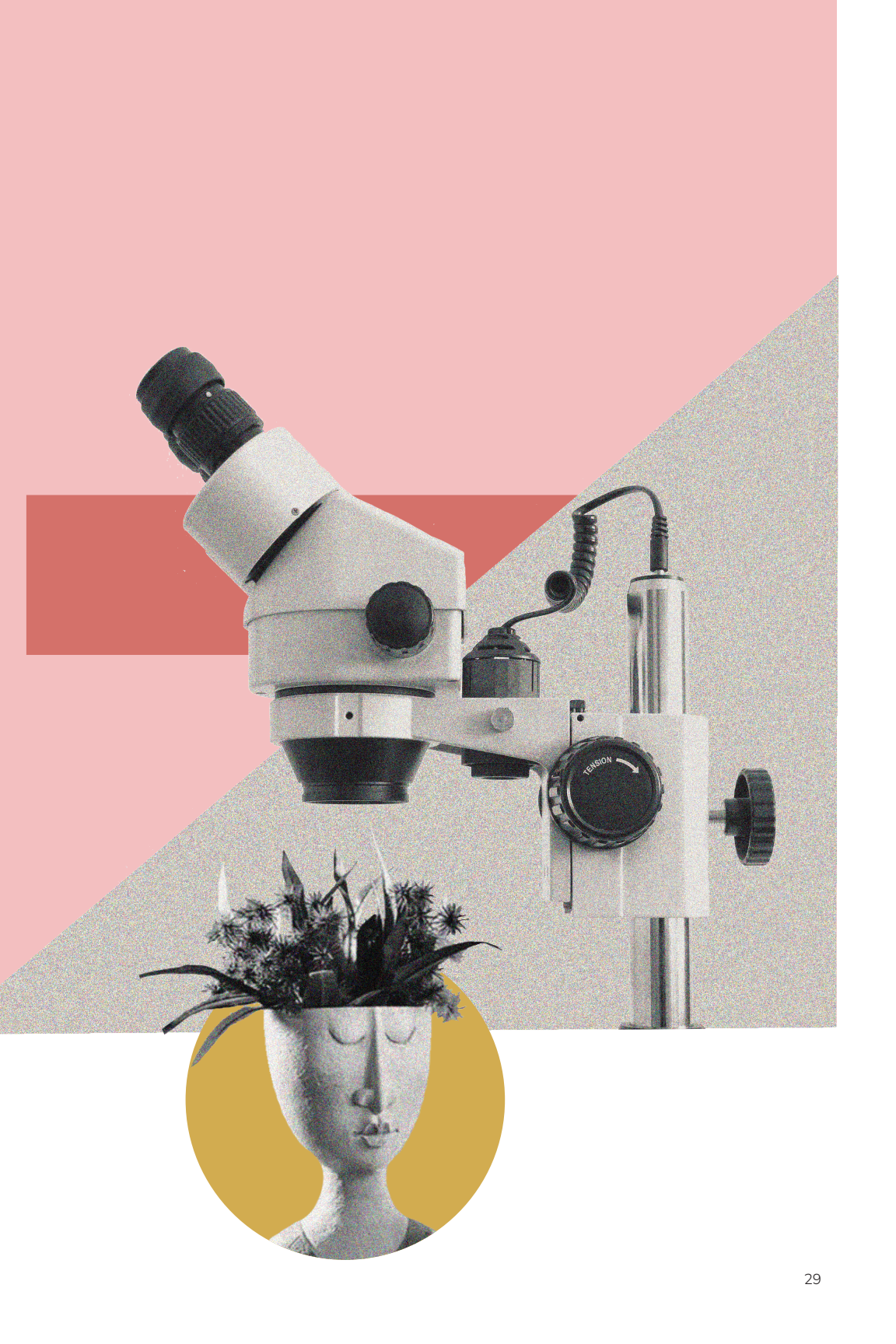
In Hubli, I didn't know my acute discomfort was an experience of what it meant to do novel research, which involves being seriously challenged in your assumptions and the power of knowledge you hold. I knew even less that I would come not just to enjoy, but thrive in these situations. As in life, it is daunting to approach research with a murky idea of the path to follow. The doubt, feelings of mediocrity and nagging unease all go into the emotional labour of learning what it truly means to ask a question and follow through with an answer. In times like these, I find it important to think back to what I love about research; asking questions no one has asked before, learning about people whose lives differ from mine and finding ways to help them help themselves. It was, after all, in the midst of such ambiguity that I rediscovered my love of enquiry that has gotten me this far.

⁴ Don't Suppose, Diagnose! The BETA Project - ideas42. (n.d.). ideas42. Retrieved from <https://www.ideas42.org/blog/dont-suppose-diagnose-beta-project/>

2

Microscope

Specifying the gaze from close



Behind closed doors: Intra-household dynamics and decision making

By Shriyam Gupta



The role played by family members can be complicated especially with regards to daughter-in-laws, who both rely on in-laws for support to navigate husbands preferences on financial decisions, and are subjected to pressures from them to comply with fertility decisions.

Attempts at capturing intra-household dynamics involve an additional burden of getting participants to share mundane everyday experiences of life within their home, which respondents may not necessarily even pay attention to, or remember, or think of as relevant.

A common theme across Busara's work over the past three years in India has revolved around understanding what constitutes the 'household'. Whether it was understanding families financial behavior in Odisha, propelling women's ability to make reproductive decisions in Bihar and Odisha, deciphering couple's dynamics on spending and purchase decisions in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Karnataka, or mapping out the interplay of gender social norms on life of adolescent girl, knowing what happened behind the closed door of the household motivated (both unconsciously and consciously) what we pursued.

Understanding intra-household dynamics became the focal point for two key reasons. First, we understood, both from our personal experiences and that of immense research, that family life in India is the locus of activity that informs decisions and thus one's life. The household as a site is an active micro-society with its own realities of negotiation, conflicts, and co-existence. The Indian cultural consideration, which puts the household and family at the center, can not be ignored as an established institution that needs to be studied when seeking to understand why individuals behave the way they do.

Second, given that household and family life is crucial, the mainstream development agenda—especially when it comes to programs that support women's empowerment—is being redirected to pay attention to both understanding and intervening in household dynamics.

Responding to earlier calls about the need to understand intra-household dynamics—especially women’s bargaining power—recent development research and actors have started to put intra-household dynamics under the microscope, so to say: as a focal point to understand implications on a wide variety of outcomes, including financial ability and health indicators. Thus, it became important for us to examine household dynamics in our work in India.

Over the course of three years, Busara worked on multiple projects to capture and understand such intra-household dynamics in decision-making. The research sought to inform health and financial outcomes such as by influencing contraceptive uptake and understanding women’s financial decision authority within the household. But once put under the microscope, the household expands. In this piece, we explain how household dynamics involve more than husband and wife, and how focusing on the process leading up to decision-making within the household can help decipher how larger norms inform daily individual life. We also show the various attempts we have taken to capture intra-household dynamics and how new methods can offer great success.

1 Agarwal, B. (1997). ‘Bargaining’ and Gender Relations: Within and Beyond the Household. *Feminist Economics*, 3(1), 1–51.

2 Lowe, M., & McKelway, M. (2017). *Bargaining breakdown: intra-household decision-making and women’s employment*. Working Paper.

3 Richards, E., Theobald, S., George, A., Kim, J. C., Rudert, C., Jehan, K., & Tolhurst, R. (2013). Going beyond the surface: gendered intra-household bargaining as a social determinant of child health and nutrition in low and middle income countries. *Social science & medicine*, 95, 24–33.

A case of many cooks

Intra-household dynamics involve household members other than the couple. These members, who can be imagined as living in other parts of the house than the couple (or even if not physically present) influence and exert direct control over a couple’s household decisions. Over the course of multiple projects, we have seen how other household members inform couple and family health and financial outcomes. With regards to financial decisions, elders in the family both permeate and influence financial goals of the family (including small decisions such as what and where to buy) and investment decisions on large expenditures such as houses. Children by their mere presence redirect daily expenditure choices of the family. In health decisions, a substantial body of research has documented the role of mother-in-laws’ in influencing contraceptive choice, especially in rural India, which chimes with Aditya Jagati and Aanchal Sharma’s insights into the power mother-in-laws can have over the decisions of their bahu.

Our analysis of data from Bihar and Maharashtra shows similarly that family members continue to exert influence

[on couples on reducing the timing](#)

4 Gupta S, Yagnaraman D, & Jagati A. (2022). An Endless Bargain: A Participatory Approach to Understanding Intra-household Finance. *Journal of Emerging Market Finance*. March 2022.

5 Char, A., Saavala, M., & Kulmala, T. (2010). Influence of mothers-in-law on young couples’ family planning decisions in rural India. *Reproductive Health Matters*, 18(35), 154–162.

Kumar, A., Bordone, V., & Muttarak, R. (2016). Like Mother(-in-Law) Like Daughter? Influence of the Older Generation’s Fertility Behaviors on Women’s Desired Family Size in Bihar, India. *European Journal of Population*, 32(5), 629–660.

6 Refer to page number 13

of first birth, and influence subsequent contraception use. The role played by family members can be complicated especially with regards to daughter-in-laws, who both rely on in-laws for support to navigate husbands preferences on financial decisions, and are subjected to pressures from them to comply with fertility decisions.⁷ The network of influence can come from members outside homes including employers, friends and neighbours who act as guides and influence couples' final contraception or saving choices.

Understanding the role played by other members is critical to getting a full picture of intra-household dynamics. This is especially true in contexts where multi-generation living arrangements are common. Estimates show that in India, intergenerational co-residence has increased over the past 40 years, with close to 60% married males (25-29 years) living with at least one parent in 2010 as opposed to 52% in 1980.⁸ Couples, even in nuclear settings, do not act alone. They are informed by preferences and nudges by their family members. Using the microscope to understand which family members exert influence in what areas is instrumental to unpacking household dynamics and to clarifying who a development intervention might want to target to improve certain development outcomes.

It's neither your side of the bed nor mine

Focusing on intra-household dynamics helped us capture subtleties of decision-making processes that are often overlooked in Theories of Change, which often assume a binary nature, such as a decision is taken either by husband or wife in a one-sided moment of exerting power. However, we realized that this may not be the case. In one instance, we were able to understand subtleties in how women display agency. Conventional wisdom often characterizes women as either displaying or not displaying agency within certain singular decisions. For example, in the case of decisions relating to sexual health, it is often assumed that final outcomes will often be correlated with mediatory outcomes. For example, if husbands are authority figures who decide whether to use contraception, it is deduced that women do not have any say in the entire decision-making process. However, our work has shown that this might not hold true. By focusing on conversations and discussions that lead up to decisions on contraception use, we learnt in Bihar and Maharashtra that while most women may not have the final say in using contraceptives, there is evidence that women in some cases display ability to bring up the discussion for contraception use with their partners, especially if they wish to delay having another child.⁹ One service provider in Bihar noted:

⁹ Pathfinder International India. (2022). *Exploring Pathways to Behavior Change: Understanding behaviors that influence contraception uptake and adherence among couples in the YUVA Program*. Busara (Unpublished)

⁷ Pathfinder International India. (2022). *Exploring Pathways to Behavior Change: Understanding behaviors that influence contraception uptake and adherence among couples in the YUVA Program*. Busara (Unpublished)

⁸ Esteve, A., & Liu, C. (2018). *Families in Asia: a cross-national comparison of household-size and co-residence*. *Routledge Handbook of Asian Demography*, 370-393.

“Husband decides it, but female also sometimes brings up the discussion. It a patriarchal system - we know its a male driven world.

Essentially the final decision is with the males.”

Understanding that women were bringing up the discussion, but were not getting support from the husband, helped us reframe our initial question. Our inquiry changed from who makes decisions on contraception use to why husbands do not support their wives in contraception decisions. Investigation into the new question revealed the role of social norms. Contraceptive use is often considered synonymous with female promiscuity, and thus husbands are apprehensive and disallow its use.

Defining the household as our unit of investigation allowed us to understand individual decisions as well as shed light on how community norms infiltrate an individual’s everyday life. Starting at the level of household dynamics helped us work backwards to identify larger and specific social norms that determine decisions that were of relevance to the research initiative. In our case, learning that women are able to initiate conversation with their husbands on family planning matters, but that social norms (which trickle down into household though husbands) continue to inhibit contraceptive use, helped direct our recommendations to take on more public-based events (such as discussing contraception in public forums) to challenge social norms around contraception alongside building individual

capacity of women.

Capturing pillow talk

While we have discussed the importance of understanding intra-household life, how does one capture it? Surprise surprise: documenting conversations that happen in intimate and personal spaces—such as the bedroom—is not straightforward. The obvious challenge is getting individuals to share reliable, and, as much as possible, accurate, information—a challenge that Ananya Jalan and Gitanksh Sethi elaborate on in this volume.¹⁰

In one structured survey we asked more than 4000 Microfinance Institution (MFI) clients in Odisha about conflict with their husband over finances. Three quarters of women reported that they do not argue over finances with their husbands. However, the findings may not reflect reality of the household because Indian women might not be open to sharing information about conflicts with their partners as it may suggest that they are not a good couple or ideal wife. Structured, quantitative surveys may be unable to capture the nuance of conflicts in the limited number of responses, but these challenges are present even in qualitative research. For instance, in Bihar and Maharashtra, both men and women, when asked to report any conflict with their partner, denied having

¹⁰ Refer to page number 36

any kind of disagreement with their partners. Respondents in this case may be apprehensive about being judged by the interviewer for reporting conflict, or may not recall the event, or may not have even understood the question. However, such issues around recall bias, telescoping errors, Hawthorne effect, or social desirability among others are applicable to any data collection process. These can be even more exaggerated when considering aforementioned sensitive issues related to conflict around finances or sexual health.

A typical answer often looked like the following:

Interviewer(I): Did you have any conflict with your wife?

Respondent(R): No.

I: Means you had a fight with your wife?

R: No.

Attempts at capturing intra-household dynamics involve an additional burden of getting participants to share mundane everyday experiences of life within their home, which respondents may not necessarily even pay attention to, or remember, or think of as relevant. It is in these experiences, however, that dynamics and decision processes play out. Further, many times the gulf in the vocabulary between respondent and interviewer means that knowledge may not necessarily transfer—this is a manifestation of power as described by Jagati, Sharrma and Ashok in this volume.¹¹

¹¹ Refer to page number 21 and 65

While traditional methods, such as semi-structured interviews and survey questions, helped capture initial insights, we were most successful in understanding nuances when we employed photovoice to gain greater details about a couples' household dynamics. Photovoice or photo elicitation is a participative research technique that refers to 'inserting a photograph into a research interview'.¹² The method enabled us to capture conflictual dynamics associated with intra-household dynamics in financial decision making across three states in India.¹³ In the study, we asked respondents to share photographs about something that 'their partner and them disagreed about spending money on'. Participants, who were earlier hesitant to discuss—and in some cases even denied having any—conflict with their partners, talked openly about different disagreements they had with their spouses (see Figure 1). In particular, photo elicitation had two key advantages for the study. First, photos helped jog participant's memories with visual clues, which helped them share otherwise mundane quotidian events and emotional responses¹⁴ that may have been overlooked in semi-structured interviews. Second, getting participants to share photographs allowed respondents to bring more of themselves on their own terms. In doing so, they were able to give more "concrete" examples to otherwise

¹² Harper, D. (2002). Talking about pictures: A case for photo elicitation. *Visual studies*, 17(1), 13-26.

¹³ Gupta S, Yagnaraman D, & Jagati A. (2022). An Endless Bargain: A Participatory Approach to Understanding Intra-household Finance. *Journal of Emerging Market Finance*. March 2022.

¹⁴ Gariglio, L. (2016). Photo-elicitation in prison ethnography: Breaking the ice in the field and unpacking prison officers' use of force. *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal*, 12(3), 367–379.



For cooler, we both had fight. She said: we won't take cooler, already we have burden of cow, now we can't have burden of this. Due to this, we both had fight. I said, we will slowly take it out and give it back[...] Her view was that how we will pay this money. I answered her and slowly pacified her

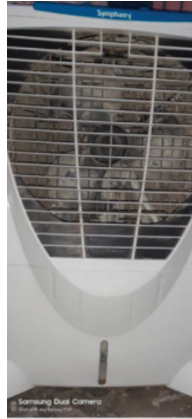


Figure 1: Respondents photo and verbal response to questions on disagreement with partner on financial decision making.

“abstract” concepts of family relationships and dynamics.¹⁵

Ample calls have been made for development programs to become sensitive to the population they are serving.¹⁶ At Busara, we started on this journey by taking the household as the first point of contact and entry. It is this pushing to understand mechanisms and experiences within the household that often get overlooked in public policies that forget that they often actually play out in the private space of the household. Understanding such dimensions can help with framing and can shape interventions and products to play to each domain, and help avoid pitfalls of conventional wisdom that may continue to define policy. Thinking of people’s lives as playing out in the dynamics of their closest household relationships, in the most intimate rooms of their homes and putting those under the microscope, moves social research closer to the reality of individual lives. While it may be awkward and challenging to capture intra-household dynamics, it is only by opening and learning what is happening behind the closed household doors that we can become sensitive to realities of everyday life, and thus contribute towards designing more thoughtful, realistic and appropriate policies.

15 Soaita, A. M., & McKee, K. (2021). Researching Home’s Tangible and Intangible Materialities by Photo-Elicitation. *Housing, Theory and Society*, 38(3), 279–299.

16 Schomerus, M. (2023). *Lives Amid Violence: Transforming Development in the Wake of Conflict*. London: Bloomsbury.

The search for honesty in data



By Ananya Jalan and
Gitanksh Sethi



In our work in India, we have found several situations where respondents are unable to engage with us in ways that are fully authentic or honest because of who we are, the power we hold as researchers and what we look for."

Hiring diverse field officers at a more local level who are representative of the people the research is trying to understand is key to gathering better quality insights.

Humans aren't always honest. In a way, this insight is one of the founding principles of behavioral science: how humans think and behave is not always reflective or an honest representation of how people say they think and behave. For behavioral scientists, seeking data is integral to designing effective interventions and informing policies reflective of the people they aim to reach. But when our work relies so heavily on self-reported data, and we know that people can be dishonest about how they portray themselves, we find ourselves at a road-block. Can we trust our data? Do we feel like the insights we generate can truly represent those of the populations we are studying? When we look very closely at our data—put it under the microscope—does it honestly tell the same story as we first thought?

Ensuring that our research adequately represents the studied populations is one of the cornerstones of good research. While we are often rigorous and proactive in our sampling strategies to create a so-called representative sample (with participation across key demographics of gender, region, caste and income), the true representativeness of the data depends deeply on how authentic its respondents are when engaging in the research. In our work in India, we have found several situations where respondents are unable to engage with us in ways that are fully authentic or honest because of who we are, the power we hold as researchers and what we look for.

To provide an example, in an ongoing study to understand and reduce bystander

inaction in situations of gender violence, we surveyed college students in northern India, asking how harmful they consider non-physical forms of gender violence—such as stalking, staring and verbal harassment. Most students stated that they think all those acts are harmful. However, when we interviewed similar students more closely, probing them on what forms of violence they might intervene in, we found that some students de-emphasized violence of subtle, psychological or verbal nature, saying 'stalking and verbal abuse is probably okay to ignore'. The samples of students we spoke to were similar, but the perspectives we got from them were different and diverging, and being able to identify and address this level of unreliability in our research is crucial.

As responsible researchers, there are certain questions we need to ask ourselves before we begin, that will allow us to pre-empt, and ameliorate this dishonesty in the data (although it might not always be a conscious act of being dishonest by the respondent). Reflecting on situations such as the one above, we identify some common barriers that prevent respondents in India from engaging authentically with the researcher. We point to some creative solutions that we have used to answer the questions of how to engage with respondents in the best possible manner to ensure they are bringing their most unfiltered selves to us and giving data that will hold up to scrutiny under the microscope.

When it comes to vulnerable groups in India, such as those from a lower socioeconomic

status, subdued castes, or those with limited decision-making power—those who hold none of the characteristics of power that Jagati and Sharrma describe in this volume),¹ this authenticity we speak of is that much harder to achieve. Particularly minority populations and women lack comfort in voicing opinions, especially when topics can be controversial or sensitive. When developing the report “The Barriers to Effective Family Planning” in partnership with Pathfinder, India, we found that it was often difficult to approach women for conversations around contraceptive use.² Especially in the presence of others around them, such as their husbands or mothers-in-law, women felt hesitant to voice their true opinions for fear of repercussions. In this situation, reaching women in spaces where they feel secure and comfortable, such as in self-help groups (SHGs) or in Anganwadi Centres (AWCs) worked towards making women feel safe expressing their views. Ensuring that the surveyor or interviewer is from the same demographic or social group as the participant is also important to increase that level of comfort—as it addresses the power imbalance that research brings.

Is the topic of research, or the questions we are asking, sensitive for the respondent to answer?

It is essential to remember here that context is key. What might be normal in what Henrich et al have termed the WEIRD contexts (Western, Educated, Industrial, Rich, Democratic) might be considered taboo or difficult for respondents in other contexts.³

Sensitive or taboo topics are often burdened with stigma that prevents open discussion. Intra-marital conflict is one such taboo topic in India where couples do not like to admit marital strife, as Gupta outlines in this volume.⁴ Drawing on research conducted by Shriyam Gupta, Dhvani Yagnaraman and Aditya Jagati on household dynamics, in household financial decision-making with Dvara, and on housing needs of low income populations with Sa-dhan, Gupta et al. tried to better understand family conflict.⁵ They witnessed social desirability bias, where husbands and wives did not want to admit to any kind of intra-marital conflict, despite probing for the true answer in multiple ways. Photo elicitation helped with overcoming that barrier and, writes Gupta, “participants, who were earlier hesitant in discussing and in some cases even denied having any conflict

1 Refer to page number 13

2 Pathfinder International. (2022). *Exploring Pathways to Behavior Change: Understanding behaviors that influence contraception uptake and adherence among couples in the YUVA Program*. Busara (Unpublished)
38

3 Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). The Weirdest People in the World? *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 33(2/3), 61–83.

4 Refer to page number 28

5 Gupta S, Yagnaraman D, & Jagati A. (2022). An Endless Bargain: A Participatory Approach to Understanding Intra-household Finance. *Journal of Emerging Market Finance*. March 2022.

with their partners, talked openly about different disagreements they had with their spouses.”⁶ Using photos rather than just words was a creative way to get at unfiltered thinking and behaviors rather than by asking more direct questions where there might be clearly perceived “right” and “wrong” answers. It is a good example of how much applying a different lens can make a huge difference.

Are the settings conducive to honest conversation, or does the research environment make authentic engagement difficult?

In India’s patriarchal societies, pervasive social norms around gender often prevent the free participation of women in public life, leading to the need to think through the setting in which we conduct research. To better understand social norms across gender-transformative programs in India, Krittika Gorur and Shriyam Gupta in collaboration with the Children’s Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) found that girls and women in India lack physical independence or the ability to be alone outside of the home without family or other women.⁷ During COVID-19, this made recording insights from female adolescents difficult, as using remote mediums, such as

⁶ Refer to page number 28

⁷ Briefing Book of Applied Social Norm Change. (2020). Retrieved from <https://ciiff.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/CIFF-Briefing-Book-Digital.pdf>

phones, for data collection was curtailed when the father or another male household head controlled the use of a device.

This affected the research because it became difficult to independently engage with women in secluded or safe places, without the presence of their partners or other family members. In such situations, uprooting women from this environment lacking privacy such as by taking them into another room, would be important to help counter the strength of the restrictive norms as research is taking place. Anisha Singh, in her work on improving the uptake of Iron and Folic Acid (IFA) pills among pregnant women, repurposed a public bus to be a Mobile Lab to conduct intervention testing with vulnerable and last-mile populations of women in India (read more on the study, here)⁸ to offer privacy and access.

⁸ Improving the uptake and adherence of IFA pills among pregnant and lactating women. (2020). Retrieved from https://work.busaracenter.org/case-studies/CSBC_Anaemia.pdf



Lack of access is a big problem in the pursuit of authentic engagement with respondents. Lack of access can take many forms in India, such as when certain groups are unable to travel independently to participate in research, when people lack the tools or technology needed to participate, or when it is difficult for research teams to reach communities due to language or logistical barriers. In Busara's work with Dvara to understand household financial decision-making, the researchers could not access a family's natural settings to observe the husband and wife while they were making decisions (the aforementioned problem of having to capture closed door conversations that Gupta outlines in this volume),⁹ and just asking questions in a survey would likely make the data ripe with self-report biases.

To counter this lack of access and observe actual behavior within a research setting, we leveraged a creative method to measure real decision making, a board game (Figure 1). In the game, each couple teamed up with their partners to play against another couple while facilitators capture the couples' conversations when developing the joint and individual objectives for their game. The game replicated typical household financial decisions, mimicking real-life situations and thus allowing the researchers to more

⁹ Refer to page number 28

accurately gauge real-life behaviors.

When research teams, including field officers and enumerators, do not represent the populations they are studying, there are consequences. India's diversity of ethnicities, cultures, religions and dialects is rarely fully reflected among research teams who are often from majority demographic groups. We work across multiple states and towns, where the respondents speak a language or dialect different from that of the field officers, or researchers are from different socio-economic classes, immediately offsetting the researchers as the out-group in the field and creating power-imbalances (as Jagati and Sharma and Ashok relay in this volume).¹⁰ Subsequently, in the case of language barriers, husbands, children or others at home who might be more literate and well-versed in other languages became translators for women respondents.

For example, while developing the "Briefing Book of Applied Social Norm Change" to better understand social norms across gender-transformative programs in India,¹¹ the team found it challenging that women in Rajasthan did not speak Hindi (the language with which the field officers were familiar). Husbands who spoke more Hindi became translators for their wives, which made women more conscious as they felt the need to filter themselves due to the presence of this middle man. Hiring diverse field officers at a more local level who are representative of the people the research is trying to understand is key to gathering better quality

¹⁰ Refer to page number 13 and 21

¹¹ Briefing Book of Applied Social Norm Change. (2020). Retrieved from <https://ciff.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/CIFF-Briefing-Book-Digital.pdf>

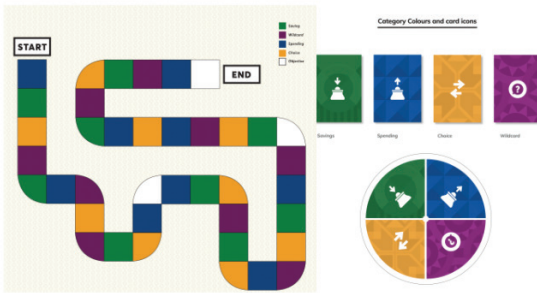


Figure 2:
Board Game from
research on household
financial decision making

*Respondents spin the wheel which determines which box they will move to. Each color on the board corresponds to one of the four categories of cards. Based on the box, they pick up a card, and answer the question or consider the action in it.

insights. Further, adopting methods in participatory research can shift the power away from the researchers, and back into the hands of the respondent, allowing for more authentic engagement.

While we have made advancements and discoveries in better identifying where we slip up as researchers, there is still some way to go in addressing our own limitations and biases. This also means that in all research processes, we have to be prepared to put ourselves under the microscope. Asking ourselves these sometimes difficult questions about power, representation and imbalance before starting research and holding ourselves more accountable to the answers (even if, as Ashok writes in this volume, they do not follow our assumptions)¹² will inch us closer in our search for honesty in insights that are truly reflective and representative of the people we are trying to understand.

¹² Refer to page number 21

3



Wide-angle lens

The broad angles of success



Designing empowerment for the double burden women carry

By Pooja Gupta



While social norms limit women's freedom, conforming to these norms gives women social bargaining power, so their time investment in fulfilling their gender roles is also an investment in other types of change.

By accounting for factors such as women's double burden in being bound by and needing to navigate social norms, behavioral science needs to marry principles of decision research with localized feminist approaches to advance the impact of development programs.

In 2022, women's labor force participation in India dwindled, with only 20.3% of women above 15 years of age engaged in formal economic activity.¹ Also, women's investment in care work has been increasing: In India, women spend on average 297 minutes a day on unpaid care work, compared to 31 minutes spent by men². A common explanation for these trends is traditional gender norms and social expectations. These limit women's access to employment opportunities outside their homes and burden women with care and child-rearing responsibilities within the household. Policymakers have recognized the importance of changing social norms to achieve women's economic empowerment (WEE). International development projects now attempt to influence and measure women's economic empowerment using standardized definitions and metrics that capture the changing social landscape within communities.

The formal definition of WEE includes three indicators:

- i) access to resources;
- ii) agency or control over resources and the power to make decisions; and
- iii) achievements such as economic advancement or the adoption of technology.

Although aspirational, these definitions

¹ World Bank, World Development Indicators database. Labour force, female (as a % of the total labour force) - India. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.FE.ZS?locations=IN>

² International Labour Office. (2018). Care Work and Care Jobs: For the Future of Decent Work. Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_633135/lang--en/index.htm

fail to represent the lived experiences of women and do not capture the double burden that women carefully and intentionally navigate: While social norms limit women's freedom, conforming to these norms gives women social bargaining power, so their time investment in fulfilling their gender roles is also an investment in other types of change.

Women's economic reality is that they rely on their husbands to allow them, for example, to buy a mobile phone or to visit a friend or family. However, they negotiate their mobility or access to resources by prescribing to their traditional gender roles of caregiving (i.e. by fulfilling the expectations of them), rather than by abandoning the roles and being vocal about unfairness. Thus, women work around existing gender norms to improve their emotional and material well-being at the margins, instead of outright challenging or seeking to shift norms altogether.

On a global scale, this might seem like the opposite of empowerment. This nature of progress, lacking a revolutionary or disruptive tone, could miss being recognized or celebrated under the formal definition of WEE. However, this approach recognizes the unique needs of women and responds to their context (especially their double burden) and avoids painting men and women with the same strokes of what empowerment means. This could be looked at as a feminist approach to empowerment—in some ways it is a broadening of the lens through which women's empowerment is usually viewed or defined towards a wider angle.

Culture as a mediator to understanding WEE

An important classifier in the study of empowerment is the cultural context in which we work. Hernandez and Iyengar have shown that for interdependent, collectivist societies, such as India, conformity to norms within one's in-group and adjusting to the desires of others is more natural and intrinsic.³ The research demonstrates that due to the rules that shape social interactions, norm adherence becomes intrinsically motivated rather than only being driven by extrinsic motivation of rewards or sanctions, which would be the case in independent and more individualistic societies, namely Western societies.

We also saw this reflected in women's firm choice of role models in four research across India. Women admire other women who earn an income outside the house, however, the most revered trait—that is the most-expressed social preference—is the working woman's ability to seamlessly balance the workplace with her traditional household responsibilities.

When designing solutions to increase female labor force participation in India, a feminist empowerment approach would capture these social preferences of women to maximize their participation and minimize resistance from cultural gatekeepers. For instance, actively tracking the provision and quality of creches in workplaces and holding business owners accountable could ensure that women

³ Hernandez, M., & Iyengar, S. S. (2001). What drives whom? A cultural perspective on human agency. *Social cognition*, 19(3: Special issue), 269-294.

are able to shoulder the double burden of working while catering to their caregiving duties. Similarly, designing flexible workplace policies, such as the timing of work, could help both men and women be more responsive to household needs while contributing to household income.

Finding a feminist approach

A social norms approach has been championed by applied behavioral science.⁴ For instance, showing individuals how others, like them, are behaving has been successful in promoting desired behaviors around energy and water conservation. Wazir has critiqued the application of these principles of social norms to complex development challenges in the Global South, arguing that by drawing analogies between why people follow traffic rules (or recycle their towels) and why people choose to participate in Female Genital Mutilation (because others do it!) is a gross oversimplification.⁵ I would go further to argue that this line of thinking is harmful because it diverts attention from the main problem, overlooks the context and places the demand for agency on people who may not have the power to act—and, as we know from Jagati and Sharrma in this volume, power underpins everything in India.⁶

4 Legros, S., & Cislighi, B. (2020). Mapping the social-norms literature: An overview of reviews. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 15(1), 62-80.

5 Wazir, R. (2022). Social Norm Change, Behavioral Approaches and the Politics of Knowledge: A Conversation between the Ivory Tower and the Field. *Development and Change*.

6 Refer to page number 13

The critiques highlighted in the paper indicate a gaping need to contextualize the methods and theories used in behavioral science, especially when addressing behaviors that are deeply rooted in cultural norms and traditions, of which gender is a prominent example. By accounting for factors such as women's double burden in being bound by and needing to navigate social norms, behavioral science needs to marry principles of decision research with localized feminist approaches to advance the impact of development programs.

Norms traps

Norms traps demonstrate how development interventions that use a blanket approach to social norm change to achieve WEE can be hurtful to the status quo. Through our work, we have described a norm trap as a situation where an individual is unable to gradually break away from restrictive normative structures, despite social and economic progress with changing times. Below are two examples from public health that showcase the norm traps in which Indian women can get stuck when program design is blind to the double burden they face.

Norm trap 1: Delaying family delays empowerment

Delaying the age of first pregnancy is included as a priority action in the India Newborn Action Plan (INAP).⁷ The

7 Ministry of Family Welfare, Government of India. (2014). India Newborn Action Plan. Retrieved from <https://www.>

assumption is that encouraging families to delay the firstborn allows women more time to complete their education, have better health and participate in the labor market. This Theory of Change is ripe with contradictions. In India, children are a source of social affirmation and status in a marriage, especially for women. Women, in our research, argued that having the first child improves their status within the household.⁸ Women claimed gaining a voice and decision-making power within the family, which gave them a sense of security in a new unfamiliar territory. Promoting delayed childbearing can therefore interfere with women's personally crafted pathway to empowerment.

Norm trap 2: **Priming gender roles through identity salience**

Social and behavior change campaigns use 'priming of identity' to engage certain desirable behaviors. For example, hand-washing campaigns highlight the role of the mother as the primary actor in ensuring that children wash their hands. This practice comes from a body of research that concludes that people have multiple identities and making certain identities more salient than others could be a strong determinant of behavior.⁹ Social and Behavior Change (SBC) campaigns have leveraged these findings and have called upon the identity of women as mothers to

be the caretakers and protectors of their children's health and well-being in pursuit of improved child health. While these campaigns have been hugely successful in preventing communicable diseases and improving child health,¹⁰ they may also have unintended consequences by reinforcing gender norms around the woman's role as the primary caregiver, alleviating the responsibility of the man from this decision/situation.

These campaigns, when rolled out at scale, could perpetuate stereotypes about the characteristics of a good mother. If a good mother is defined as a caregiver and nurturer whose only priority is to be present for her children and serve their needs, any woman who deviates from this norm might face heavy social sanctions such as restrictions on movement or disapproval from family members and community. This puts social pressure on women to conform to the norm, irrespective of their desire to work outside the home or to engage in other social or economic activities. Modeling stereotypical behaviors such as the role of a mother could reduce women's

¹⁰ Biran, A., Schmidt, W. P., Varadharajan, K. S., Rajaraman, D., Kumar, R., Greenland, K., ... & Curtis, V. (2014). Effect of a behaviour-change intervention on handwashing with soap in India (SuperAmma): a cluster-randomised trial. *The Lancet Global Health*, 2(3), e145-e154.

newbornwhocc.org/INAP_Final.pdf

⁸ Finlay, J. E., & Lee, M. A. (2018). Identifying causal effects of reproductive health improvements on women's economic empowerment through the Population Poverty Research Initiative. *The Milbank Quarterly*, 96(2), 300-322.

⁹ Stryker, S., & Serpe, R. T. (1982). Commitment, identity salience, and role behavior: Theory and research example. *In Personality, roles, and social behavior* (pp. 199-218). Springer, New York, NY.

bargaining power within the household by skewing the expectations of family members and reinforcing strict gender roles.

A combined behavioral science and local feminist empowerment worldview

Instead of designing a suite of programs that directly challenge hardwired gender norms, programs need to offer a range of solutions—a much wider lens on their work—to help women with varying levels of baseline control and agency to improve their status. For instance, instead of advocating for delaying the first child, resources should be directed towards promoting delaying the age of marriage of girls since families have strong mental models that anchor the timing of the first child to the age of marriage. Similarly, instead of using priming to reinforce gender bias, priming could be used favorably to flip expectations onto men to be supportive and active fathers and invest time in household and caregiving activities.

The current design of programs leaves women alone to navigate the tension between culture, their context and the prescriptive behaviors propagated by development programs, compromising their sense of security and well-being in the name of empowerment. Breaking down lofty social norm change into incremental goals and mapping local pathways that can be leveraged to change behaviors can be effective

ingredients for a feminist pie. Behavioral science has offered us powerful tools to generate local knowledge, for example, the ability to empathize with our end-user and diagnose a problem in depth before formulating design recommendations (although in practice, this can be challenged by the reality of funding and programmatic interests, as Ashok argues in this volume)¹¹. While laws and policies endorse and signal an ideal state, understanding the local realities and the absorption capacity of women, their families and communities (and their households, as Gupta highlights in this volume)¹² is the first step to designing objectives and programs that can improve the status quo and broaden the definition of success for women in absolute terms.



¹¹ Refer to page number 21

¹² Refer to page number 28

Assembly line of success: From the low-hanging fruit to long-term social change



By Jaspreet Singh and Ritika Divekar



If designed and pursued properly, harvesting the low-hanging fruit can produce gains that are disproportionately larger than the efforts put into picking the fruit.

In this mix of setting up what is important between the different collaborators involved, the decisions around how to define success and how to measure it, ironically, come at the cost of excluding those a program seeks to support.

Imagine waking up one morning with a feeling of wanting to bring about social change in the developing world (for some of us, all over again). How many ways can you think of doing this? Would you want to be a part of designing policies, starting an NGO, funding one, or building a team that works on the last mile in this long channel of stakeholders? There are many possible pathways and much to do because social change is challenging. Period.

In a natural setting, social change usually occurs over long timeframes; and there tends to be no easily identifiable single moment of change that can help divide and classify shifting social dynamics.¹ It is also challenging to measure social change at any given point in time as it is so dynamic and complex.

Into this set of challenges, enter us: the applied social development professional! Our job is to effect or at least find evidence-based ways to support social change. But social change is a complex untameable beast, which walks to its beats. Its tread is untraceable, except perhaps in retrospect (with some healthy doses of hindsight bias) and to track it in real-time is at the very least awkward.

Yet, we plow steadily on in our quest toward that elusive goal of effective and measurable social change, but the road to such an indeterminate destination is not exactly paved by past travelers.

1 Marquis, D. G. (1947). Psychology of social change. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 249(1), 75-80.

Put yourself in our shoes. Let's say the problem you want to tackle lies at the heart of the financial inclusion of women in India. The following is the first result you read when you look for statistics around the topic. "The World Bank shows, 76.6% of women in India were 'financially included', i.e., were registered within the formal banking channels²." How would you define making an impact in this context? Does it mean reaching close to 100% of women to be financially included? Does it mean deepening the inclusion of the 77% of women by translating their inclusion into increased financial knowledge or activity? Who decides where the priority lies? And most importantly, where do these women lie in the long list of stakeholders? What does successful financial inclusion look like for them? We need measurements, but we might need to broaden our lens to find contextually appropriate ways to define success.

Defining metrics

Most social development endeavors are connected and influenced by stakeholders ranging from the funder to the grassroots organization that implements a program. In between gather a host of specialized organizations like subject matter experts, government institutions, or academic researchers. In such a complex mix of stakeholders, it can be difficult to gain a clear consensus on metrics of change and, with that, of success. Further, broad-scoped

2 The Economic Times. (2022). View: India cannot attain its goal of inclusive growth if financial independence of rural women is ignored. Retrieved from <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/view-india-cannot-attain-its-goal-of-inclusive-growth-if-financial-independence-of-rural-women-is-ignored>

institutions like funders have more say in defining metrics as they have to pull off the balancing act between governance interests, impact on end-beneficiaries as well as managing present and future relationships with key stakeholders. In a way, funders often naturally have to have a narrower lens of what success is to keep their business going.

In this process of finding the right balance among a range of stakeholders, there lie varied metrics that can help define what success means to each one on the entire spectrum. At Busara, as in general applied behavioral science across the world, project metrics have varied from experiment-based measures to qualitatively-generated insights that describe and contextualize a problem. Often research objectives need to be narrowed to simplistic metrics that are verifiable under the timelines of short-term projects to draw out relevant conclusions.

Clearly, success will depend on how these stakeholders define the finish line as well as the waypoints. This creates an interesting dilemma. As change in the development sector deals with deeply entrenched social fabric and is rarely one-shot, development professionals are tasked with reducing these complex mechanisms into measurable metrics. Applied behavioral researchers usually come up with solutions rooted in experimental economics and behavioral science, for example, experiments to test hypotheses, qualitative deep dives to understand barriers and enablers and even design workshops to create inclusive solutions. All of these, especially when iterated (as outlined by Ashok in this volume)³ are successful to a certain extent in solving

a bite-sized abstraction of a problem. But when applied behavioral researchers then put on the wide-angle lens to zoom out and think about long-term social change and end-benefactors, they do not automatically arrive at the bigger picture of what the steps of success towards that broader change are.

Yet, this does not devalue applied behavioral science as a toolbox. The global trend towards using more behavioral insights is helping to fill the right gaps in research methodologies to strengthen social development initiatives (even if the research that draws on data collected in the Global South is extremely limited).⁴ Yet, researchers need to be aware of the pros and cons of their chosen methodological pathways that help deconstruct overall research goals into bite-sized targets (and with that, likely bite-sized notions of success).

Low-hanging fruit

Let's start with a mainstay primary target of applied behavioral science in the formative years of the field. As the story goes, a series of experiments revealed some very basic mental inconsistencies which humans display while making decisions; these were identified as addressable through simple tweaks like 'choice architecture'.⁵ Tweaking and pursuing goals at an extensive margin seems rewarding. This is because there are many low-hanging fruits of success that have not been plucked. Yet, if designed

⁴ Henrich, J. (2020). *The WEIRDest people in the world: How the West became psychologically peculiar and particularly prosperous*. Penguin UK.

⁵ Thaler, R. H., & Ganser, L. J. (2015). *Misbehaving: The making of behavioral economics*. New York: W. W. Norton.

and pursued properly, harvesting the low-hanging fruit can produce gains that are disproportionately larger than the efforts put into picking the fruit.

If simple interventions like reminder nudges or norm-based messages show measurable improvement, there is no reason why they shouldn't be used by those pursuing steps in social change. Moreover, low-hanging fruits create demonstration effects: a measurably successful intervention strengthens the conviction of stakeholders (for example, a government) that the applied behavioral science approach is worth pursuing. The case of addressing simple problems (like tax non-compliance requiring sending reminder letters) helped build the entire BIT Nudge Unit in the UK, for instance.⁶

An important takeaway from this perspective on success is quick wins can be useful, as they generate a use case for certain interventions. However, such low-hanging fruit interventions usually only work at the 'extensive' margin - meaning, they are effective with people who were unwittingly making sub-optimal choices. Mechanisms at the 'effective' margins are not useful as a model for deeper and more complex social change: Low-hanging fruit interventions, after all, do not tackle barriers and enablers of profound social change.

6 Halpern, D. (2015). *Inside the nudge unit: How small changes can make a big difference*. Random House.

Influencing social metrics

Usually, metrics defining broad-based change in individual behaviours are socially driven, as human decisions are rarely taken without social context and sit within a social architecture. In our work in India, we have observed the supreme impact of social referents on decision-making at the household level, especially in a rural setting, on topics ranging from family planning to financial decisions to sanitation. Even among relatively new concerns, such as data privacy, social signalling was seen to play a role in guiding individual behaviours towards trust in data sharing.⁷

However, from the perspective of implementation, social architecture can be tricky. Influencing one group of actors to change behavior might pit them against another group with a vested interest—such is the case as outlined by Gupta in her study on the double burden of social norms women bear in this volume.⁸ Further, access to different social groups is usually restricted by different stakeholders, which makes implementing solutions complex. Because social impact can manifest itself

7 Behavioral Experiments in Data Privacy (2020). IntAct, Busara & the Centre for Social and Behaviour Change. Retrieved from https://busaracenter.org/rport-pdf/InAct_Report.pdf

8 Refer to page number 44

in so many ways given its subjective and variable nature, often the metrics to measure this impact can leave little room for scope changes at the researcher or implementation partner level. In this mix of setting up what is important between the different collaborators involved, the decisions around how to define success and how to measure it, ironically, come at the cost of excluding those a program seeks to support.

Using behavioral science at the systems level

To be able to solve for long-term social change, it is essential that funders, researchers or implementers find better approaches to designing within a social setting. For solutions to be the most dynamic product of the interactions between the supply and demand sides (with the supply side defined as those offering a solution, as Chouhan and Sharrma argue in this volume)⁹ requires that those designing solutions shift their focus from sometimes inadvertently assuming they know what is best to placing fair and equal weight on the value that the people bring to building these solutions. This is especially true in the development sector, as its underpinning ethos is to increase the social value with which the people consider themselves.

Reflecting on what is needed to overhaul our definition of success, we found the following perspectives from our work in India over the past few years useful:

⁹ Refer to page number 74

(a) using a long-term frame for defining success and creating programs

The needle on social change moves over long periods of time and short- to midterm metrics cannot do this pace justice. For balance between long- and short-term frames, short-term projects need to work alongside independent long-term frameworks. Operationally, this implies the need to take results of individual studies to policymakers to contribute, bit by bit, to conversations on long-term development of evidence-based interventions. Isolated programs will likely fail to have long-term impacts beyond successful pilots. Partnering with governments brings long-term scale to an intervention, and can help make evaluations more realistic.

(b) Localise context to be mindful of differences at the ground level

Putting people first through Human-Centred Design (HCD) is one of the better ways to solve problems in the developing world. Yet, this approach comes with its own set of nuances that require attention. In countries with culturally diverse settings where exposure to any advanced intervention may be limited, a context-specific HCD approach that bridges heterogeneities through how each group may feel about, react or accept a certain solution, is essential. Given the vast differences in the regional social context in India, HCD needs to be contextualized to each subpopulation. In our work on family planning in rural India, for instance, Gupta observed sharp differences in the intra-household social dynamics of Bihar and Maharashtra which in turn defined different mechanisms of social influence between

key actors of decision-making - men, women, mothers-in-law and community health workers.¹⁰ To succeed with a pro-family planning intervention might mean different things in different states and likely requires different levers to be pulled.

For anyone who works directly with rural populations, it is clear that the benchmark against which we measure the success of research projects can be very different from how local populations determine success for themselves. Yet, the low-hanging fruit is persistently tempting as applied behavioral research is contingent on providing fast results. As researchers, we need to be mindful of potential pitfalls and execute a balancing act, keeping those in mind whom social development programs ought to benefit.

Where will this reflection take us? Another morning of waking up with ideas of how to bring about social change awaits.

¹⁰ Refer to page number 44

4



Bifocals

Seeing up close and in the distance



Approaching generalizability in applied research for India

By Kaavya Arakoni



Our ability to replicate requires knowing about the conditions that were sufficient for observing a piece of evidence, including the conditions experienced by groups of people that share certain characteristics.

Our goal is to start thinking about how context is best captured specifically in India. This means asking questions about Indian community structures, such as caste or religion, and household characteristics.

Social scientists learn about generalizability fairly early on. Generalizability is the degree to which insights from one study of a certain population can be applied to a different population. It is particularly important in behavioral science because we have to work with the assumption that the literature is generalizable to our study context when basing the design of experiments or prototypes on existing scholarship.

But what would make our findings generalizable for different versions of Indian contexts? It's a matter of redefining how we think about the people we are researching.

Redefining the rules of generalizability

The generalizability problem often comes up when thinking about how findings generated in a Western country or the Global North region, for example, can be replicated outside of that population.¹ But to think about generalizability in the far distance across international borders might blur the vision. Applying bifocal glasses, as a metaphor, allows for taking a closer sharp look at what is nearer to home because the assumption that everything that is close to or within a country's border is homogenous is not entirely accurate.

¹ Klein, R. A., Vianello, M., Hasselman, F., Adams, B. G., Adams Jr, R. B., Alper, S., ... & Sowden, W. (2018). Many Labs 2: Investigating variation in replicability across samples and settings. *Advances in Methods and Practices in Psychological Science*, 1(4), 443-490.

Within India, differences between the North and South—in language, the arts, and food—have always been salient. Over the past few years, Busara has conducted behavioral research across India's vast terrain in digital finance, sexual and reproductive health, gender, and social norms. We look next at what is generalizable from this work across India's different regions.

A prerequisite of generalization is replicability. Our ability to replicate requires knowing about the conditions that were sufficient for observing a piece of evidence², including the conditions experienced by groups of people that share certain characteristics. These are usually drawn using demographic categories. Yet, our working knowledge casts reservations about the compatibility of existing categories, created by Western tradition, and what the relevant aspects are that define India. India has 28 states, 19,500 mother tongues, and 1,406,125,928 (1.4 billion) individuals. India is varied. Generalizability in a context that is so varied surely cannot be captured by assuming that all women are the same because they are women. It is clear that in the Indian context to define people, demands more than capturing administrative differentiators that are often used in the Western world.

Looking back on our work, such as our practices on recording data about our samples or our experience working with the same behavioral heuristics across populations, it becomes clear that we need to reconsider demographic categories such

as gender, age, and education which we used to decipher and define the context. Social categories—including for example caste and ethnicity—tell a much deeper contextual story than demographic delineations. However, establishing the social categories to use can be an arduous process, but open science, with its collaborative sharing of learning and knowledge exchanges, offers invaluable guidance. Social science research in India must use more refined social categories, with a more nuanced taxonomy.

Setting cross-border comparison in motion

Given the requirement to develop nuanced social categories, are studies conducted in India generalizable across states? Could I lift my view from a nearby research study and apply the findings to a context only visible on the horizon? Could I generalise from one state to another?

Probably not. However, studies in one Indian state are likely more generalizable than a study conducted in, for example, Kenya.

Studies on digital finance for low-income individuals in urban areas might show more similarities across states when it comes to an individual's familiarity with digital financial products or trust in digital security. For a Pathfinder study on family planning, we have seen broad similarities but specific nuances that would alter how one would approach a study in the states of Maharashtra versus Bihar. We found

² Nosek, B. A., & Errington, T. M. (2020). What is replication? *PLoS biology*, 18(3), e3000691.

that women's agency and the influence of mothers-in-law were key differing factors between the two states. This changes the approach as it indicates that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work. Any intervention that we suggested needed to be mindful of very specific local social dynamics and that the target population itself could indeed be different for each state, even if they looked categorically—on gender, age, income—the same.

To allow for a comparison of the broad similarities, however, also requires careful questioning of our research designs.

We need to continuously ask ourselves whether we have recorded the right kind of data on the sample, interventions, outcomes and environments to make comparisons across Indian states. Meaningful recording of context becomes important and it is in situations of wanting to find credible grounds for comparison that it becomes clear that lacking data on social attributes—like ethnicity and caste—or on historical events beyond geographic features—handicapped us from making more extensive claims of generalisability of our findings.

Generalizability within borders

If generalizing across state borders is challenging, could research be generalisable across different contexts within one state? Busara's work in India suggest that this may be equally tricky. In a study on social norms in different communities in Rajasthan, caregivers' attitudes about girls' education varied across caste categories, where members

of one caste were more supportive of educating girls than those of another caste. Within broader classifications of caste categories—such as Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC)—communities varied in what they considered acceptable behavior of women and girls, in other words how tight or narrow their gender norms were. In rural contexts, these caste differences and their impact are more pronounced and thus capturing caste is an essential element of analyzing context.³

Generalizability beyond populations and locations

There are other ways to seek to apply findings from one area in another: Can findings gathered in one setting about one sector be applied to another sectors in the same setting? Can a study in Rajasthan on barriers and levers in using technology for natural resource management teach something important about Rajasthan that can then be applied to a study on social norms for Rajasthani women?

On a surface level, perhaps one might be reluctant to believe so; however, we learn a lot about context through every study we conduct. Purposely sharing knowledge across different sectoral studies might offer a better idea of nuances of the study population. In a natural resource management study for the Foundation of Ecological Security, we learned about channels of communication, trusted messengers, common attitudes around the

³ Mosse, D. (2018). *Caste and development: Contemporary perspectives on a structure of discrimination and advantage*. *World development*, 110, 422-436.

community, and community structure and hierarchy—particularly through qualitative inquiries.⁴ Could these learnings be taken and considered when designing a study on social norms—particularly in shaping the kinds of questions we might ask, how we might phrase recommendations for interventions, and how we assess the chance of behavior change? The answer is a resounding yes for the former two; and it is likely that we would have a better shot at achieving the latter. Insofar that the sample is representative for what we are seeking to represent in the new study, utilizing insights from other sectors might allow us to build our knowledge of a specific region or state as well, allowing future studies to become increasingly nuanced in their contextualisation as they draw on doubly verified insights about the population of interest.

Context as events

Although there are ways to use cross-sectoral learning, the potential for comparison between research from different locations or different sectors remains somewhat limited. This is, in part, because in applied research the focus is on accomplishing defined project goals and helping an identified sample population in a specific time period. At any point in time, people are influenced by ever-changing political or economic factors. These might at first seem unrelated to a study on, for example, hygiene. But researchers ought to start cultivating a responsibility to carefully record events and dynamics as contextual factors, as what goes on at one point in time might influence how replicable the

⁴ Foundation for Ecological Security. (Ongoing). India Observatory Tools: Qualitative Insights. Busara (Unpublished)

same study design is at another point in time.

COVID-19 provides a great example of how a single event can change the context.⁵ One of our research projects in Maharashtra aimed to understand the behavioral barriers to sanitation and hygiene practices. We conducted our diagnosis in January 2022, amid the third Delta Plus variant wave in India, and found an increased salience of it around sanitation and hygiene practices. While we sought to elicit in-depth perspectives of why individuals thought clean water was important and motivators that underpinned handwashing behavior after toilet use, we could not help but notice how respondents' thinking was intertwined with COVID-19 norms. Were we to use insights from a period that inherently features a heightened sense of hygiene to design a hygiene intervention, its relevance may or may not sustain expected effects in more prolonged stretches of life post-COVID.

Establishing generalizability through research practices

So far, we can conclude that generalisability is difficult to establish. Yet, are we doing enough to inch towards an India-tailored protocol, publicized through open science, to advocate for the ways outlined above for more nuanced generalisability?

⁵ Rosenfeld, D. L., Balcetis, E., Bastian, B., Berkman, E. T., Bosson, J. K., Brannon, T. N., ... & Tomiyama, A. J. (2022). Psychological science in the wake of covid-19: Social, methodological, and metascientific considerations. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 17(2), 311-333.

The first step is for researchers to make materials and findings easily accessible.⁶ Busara's research in India is growing steadily, and without a doubt, sharing our knowledge both within Busara in India and overseas, and externally with stakeholders, will elevate our work around understanding generalisability in India. To date, we have not done this part of our work particularly well, likely because we were focused on achieving immediate project aims rather than considering the long-term implications of our research.

A second necessary step is for researchers in India to explore further and expand on established Western social science practices for capturing context, which can often mean simply capturing notable demographic features.

Our goal is to start thinking about how context is best captured specifically in India. This means asking questions about Indian community structures, such as caste or religion, and household characteristics (for example, nuclear vs. extended family settings or viewing the household as a micro-society as Gupta proposes in this volume.)⁷ We need to better capture political and economic factors even in cases where the links to observed behavior may not be as immediately obvious. We need to bring in considerations of power as a foundational aspect of Indian society, as Jagati and Sharma argue in this volume;⁸ and we might need to reconsider how our findings about power are curtailed by people's ability to talk about it freely, as Jalan and Sethi argue.⁹ We might even reconsider what success in

social change means for different Indian populations, as Singh and Divekar argue¹⁰ here or how the role of women needs to be understood beyond the simple marker of gender, as P. Gupta outlines.¹¹ Using these different social categories, explored throughout this volume of beSciGHTS is vital to gaining a deeper behavioral understanding of India. As the movement towards policies that draw on behavioral insights matures, such a holistic and revised understanding of capturing context might support clarity on how these diverse factors shape behavior.

Generalizability: the way forward

To make sure that applied research produces generalizable insights for India, revisiting and redefining the categories used to interpret the social world is crucial. This shift will also allow researchers to put necessary boundaries to their claims. Yet, a rigorous process toward stronger claims of generalisability, requires several steps.

First, it requires recognizing the need for viewing generalisability differently. Second, it has to involve the practice of questioning data for its generalisability. Researchers need to more carefully define whom they are studying and what context surrounds the problem in which they are interested. Such a questioning practice will allow for a better, more contextualized understanding of the results found with a particular population sample. Finally, the process cannot happen without clarifying what

6 van der Zee, T., & Reich, J. (2018). Open education science. *AERA Open*, 4(3), 2332858418787466.

7 Refer to page number 28

8 Refer to page number 13

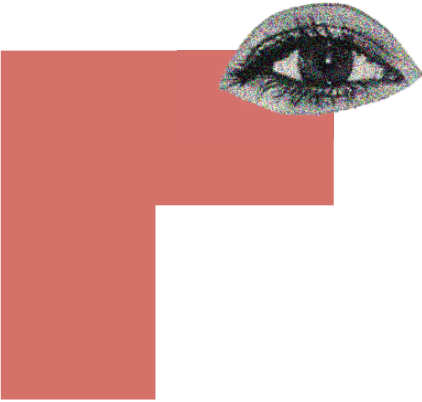
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questions really need to be asked of the data and what it represents.

With these steps in place, research can attempt to understand whether generalisability might be achievable by using social categories such as power structures, gender roles, social identities, and relationships within the household. As this process unfolds through baby steps in practice, it is prudent to remain cautious when assuming the generalisability of results to diverse samples, even if the people we study live in the same country or state.



The intersection of climate change and data privacy with behavioral science



By Aanchal Sharrma



The large quantities of information we receive and process every day seem more logical and organized when neatly categorized and tucked into labeled boxes.

Usually, when something is everybody's responsibility, it becomes nobody's responsibility. Such is the unfortunate hurdle faced by global collective challenges.

Circa 2083. Rising sea levels are submerging Indian coastal cities; across the world, people are being forced to migrate in masses; and the stringent notions of data privacy no longer exist in the European Union. Problems that once upon a time were called ‘problems of the future’ are now staring us in the eye. As people were migrating across the world to escape from the consequences of climate change, having been robbed of their privacy and ownership over their data, many were wondering: Why did the generations who came before us not act to prevent this situation from happening?’

Why indeed? Could it be because of who we are and how we think of ourselves?

Behavioral science has taught us that our identity, although seemingly individual, is also a product of social constructivism that gets to us through our peer groups, families and traditions. Under all these influences, we carve out what we care about. But what does ‘caring’ mean? It is less a choice for a cause and more a product of our ability to identify something as a problem that might have a solution. While behavioral science does give us these insights into how we work, it remains a problem that humans have a limited ability to see things in broader, more connected ways.

In fact it is in the very nature of behavioral science methods and methodologies that we miss out on identifying challenges that have more complex solutions. This can be seen very clearly when comparing how researchers think about the seemingly unrelated areas of climate change and data privacy. Both, at their core, are challenges of time that go beyond the

immediate future.

Caution: a category is approaching

Behavioral science has taught us that once we give a name to something, we can never (or only with great effort) see it another way again. Once we give our imagination shape through a category label, it is difficult to change that label.¹ Naming, classifying and categorizing classification has been humankind’s long-standing way of making sense of the unknown. The large quantities of information we receive and process every day seem more logical and organized when neatly categorized and tucked into labeled boxes. It is how we—somewhat delusionally—create a semblance of order in our world.

The human desire to categorize, is in itself a behaviorally-informed phenomenon. Vanderbilt argues that categorization eases our minds, and affects our emotions which in turn fuels further categories and alters what we see.² Things put in similar categories seem more alike, but when put in distinct categories appear to be more different.³ As a newcomer to football, I might not see the difference between Manchester United and Liverpool but meet football fans with their jersey colors, and victory chants and this difference becomes glaringly apparent.

1 Lakoff, G. (2004). Framing 101 How to Take Back Public Discourse. In G. Lakoff’s, Don’t think of an elephant! Know your values and frame the debate (pp. 3-34). White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing.

2 Vanderbilt, T. (2016). The Psychology of Genre. The New York Times, D7.

3 Tversky, A. (1977). Features of similarity. Psychological review, 84(4), 327.

In research, categorizations often happen in automatic, intuitive and socially entrenched ways—for example through the demographic characteristics that Arakoni describes in this volume. In societies where power intersects with identity in profound ways—as Jagati and Sharrma⁴ argued earlier—this has a magnifying effect. In India, caste is often synonymous with jobs, gender with roles, and positions with authority. The extent of categorization is such that an inability to label creates discomfort and dissonance. An example of this is classifying a third gender when filling out a governmental form or needing to establish whether sustainable development should be covered in the environmental or health or development budget of the nation.

Fragmentation: method or madness?

Behavioral researchers are not immune to over-believing their categories too much. The methodological imperative of behavioral science is to fragment. And by definition, it has to. To deeply understand the intricacies of human behavior, to isolate phenomena and narrow down on causal effects, behavioral researchers have to dissect each individual, group, community, etc. down to qualities, attributes, characteristics and behaviors. Behavioral scientists aim to segment to generalize, but also view such fragmentation as key to individualism.

This systematic method of looking at inconsistencies in human behavior has

allowed insight into a number of major challenges, such as planning for the future, having to deal with too much information and taking the wrong risks. But as Vanderbilt warns, the peril of relying on categories and fragments is that we could miss the wood for the trees.⁵ Categories can end up creating fixed worldviews which have been informing binary views on almost everything like the right-left political ideologies. Our tendency as researchers to view and study complexity in its parts can also numb our ability to extend our range of vision to the larger context - which instead of the individual may be the economy, the world, or even a moment in time.

The narrow approach of fragmentation restricts our ability to identify problems that stretch beyond the binary. It is easier to use existing classifications but a struggle to address challenges that lie outside such categories. Case in point: climate change and data privacy.

Why climate change and data privacy are similar challenges

Climate change and data privacy are two of the most significant, topical issues determining our future. To me, human's lack of action on either points towards characteristics they share as challenges: the challenge of time and communication.

⁴ Refer to page number 13

⁵ Vanderbilt, T. (2016). *The Psychology of Genre*. The New York Times, D7.

Comprehending time

As a race, humans tend to discount the future, seeing it as less valuable than what they have today. We struggle to perceive a danger that exists but will only show its full impact once it is too late to do anything about it.

This behavior is due to the inability to perceive the real risk of something far away in time. Hence, the fear of what might happen in the future progressively diminishes as the timeline of what constitutes the future changes from ten days to ten years to ten decades. The cost of climate change and the lack of data privacy is not always obvious - there are no immediate consequences to not reading the data privacy agreement on the application or not lobbying for emission reduction by industries. The imperception of cost creates the problem of inaction on such topics, further allowing them not even cross our minds as an everyday issue.⁶

The communication problem

When scientists and experts talk about climate change or data privacy, they often do so by invoking fear. This contributes to denial and closure towards the problem rather than galvanizing any action.⁷

6 Isaacs-Thomas, B. (2021). How young people feel about climate change and their future. PBS. Retrieved from <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/science/young-people-are-optimistic-that-theres-time-to-prevent-the-worst-effects-of-climate-change>
7 Jacquet, J., Dietrich, M., & Jost, J. T. (2014). The ideological divide and climate change opinion: “Top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5, 1458.

A 2012 survey in the United States revealed that political conservatives are more skeptical of climate change than liberals.⁸ This indicates that exposure to similar information can produce divergent reactions in different social groups. The way that people absorb new information is linked to their pre-existing beliefs and opinions.⁹ As a consequence, they might be resistant to any information that challenges those beliefs and prevents consensus on the subject.

Forming a behavioral science perspective on climate change and data privacy

Behavioral science can help unpack why the pressing problems of climate change and data privacy are not being met with decisive action. The following four insights can help us understand this:

Risks are observable and homogenous. Climate change and data privacy do not reveal the immediate costs of inaction; future costs are imperceptible. Nothing happens to me today if I do not read that data agreement or do not switch off the air conditioner. Rather, there are temporary rewards in the present in the form of

8 Saad, L. (2012). In U.S., global warming views steady despite warm winter. Gallup Poll. Retrieved from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/153608/Global-Warming-Views-Steady-Despite-Warm-Winter.aspx>

9 Ditto, P. H., & Lopez, D. F. (1992). Motivated skepticism: Use of differential decision criteria for preferred and nonpreferred conclusions. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 63(4), 568.

saved time or improved comfort. Though the risks of climate change and data privacy remain, we feel shielded by their perceived remoteness.

People see when and where the action has to take place. The theory of intertemporal discounting can help us here. People tend to prefer gaining earlier but smaller rewards in the present than larger ones in the future. This means that saving three minutes by skipping the data privacy agreement is more useful to me right now than making sure my data is protected decades later. We discount most choices for their future impact—which is disastrous for topics of climate and data.

We feel close to the problem. Usually, when something is everybody's responsibility, it becomes nobody's responsibility. Such is the unfortunate hurdle faced by global collective challenges. With challenges so far away in time and with each individual's role seemingly so small, humans tend to create a mental distance between necessary action and when to pursue it. Psychological distancing allows us to separate ourselves physically, cognitively and temporally from persons, events or times. It is almost as if a fictional character will be battling climate change in the future, resulting in procrastination, a lack of commitment, and non-participation.

It can be solved by bridging the gap between intention and action. In the cases of climate change and data privacy, a clear intent is missing. What is my concrete intent here? Will buying a

sustainable product battle climate change? Is withholding my data from a website the intent? Taking action is tough even when there is intent but becomes tougher when the link between intent and effect is evasive.

Wearing the bifocals: looking at present and future in sharp focus

Learning deeply from behavioral science will allow us to tackle challenges that require global action using a more holistic and cross-sectoral approach across time. It will also encourage the design not only of small nudges but also of large-scale interventions and policies. We can use our bifocal behavioral lens to bring the problems of the future to the present.

Tackling problems of the future

Behavioral science offers many pathways to bringing the future into the present. Below is a brief overview of what these might be:

a) Frame the problem and pick the right messenger

Privilege can insulate one from feeling the true impact of a challenge. Here, framing could highlight the severity of loss of data ownership (loss aversion), the positive outcome of one's choices to go sustainable (gain framing), or one's role in contributing to climate action (self-efficacy). Using the right messengers to deliver information (messenger effect) could solve the

communication conundrum on such topics. The Pope's letter, for example, was a convincing call to climate action by backing the scientific evidence, which was well-received by his audience worldwide.¹⁰

b) Pay attention to beliefs and systems

Look into existing systems and messages which act as potential barriers to new information. Busara has been working with Transform to encourage 'recycling behaviors' in the Global South. The qualitative research, with key recycling stakeholders in India, identified common phrases amongst non-recyclers such as 'I already use other sustainable methods' or 'what difference can one person make'.¹¹ These responses correlated with a lack of information on where to recycle despite being aware of campaigns. Men were found to be more resistant than other groups.

Ideological beliefs can also create barriers. Our reasoning is motivated by our, our groups', or our systems' beliefs.¹² These tend to be prone to being idealistic and overconfident. Neutralizing some of these ideological tendencies through scientific communication could be a way to open minds to the prioritization of certain problems and novel solutions.

10 Schiermeier, Q. (2015). Why the Pope's letter on climate change matters. *Nature*, 18.

11 TRANSFORM. (Ongoing). *Playbook for Recycling Behavior Change. Qualitative Insights: India and Kenya*. Busara

12 Taber, C. S., & Lodge, M. (2006). Motivated skepticism in the evaluation of political beliefs. *American journal of political science*, 50(3), 755-769.

c) Replicate across sectors

The third and most crucial tool is intersectoral replicability—Arakoni argues favorably in this volume about the value of learning across sectors.¹³ Busara worked with Omidyar Foundation to encourage data privacy practices among users. We identified cognitive overload and complex choice environments as major barriers to privacy consciousness. In India, the experiment revealed that identifying and changing defaults, making data privacy concerns more salient, and highlighting trust thresholds can encourage users to be more privacy-conscious. Similar approaches can be applied to climate change - defaulting to the sustainable option, for example, by not giving out plastic cutlery or labeling unsustainable options with a red tag. We have a lot to learn from behavioral challenges identified for other sectors by adopting a cross-sectoral learning approach.

d) Draw in the individual and the collective

Distinguishing between individual and global action when designing interventions is crucial. Interventions must target both drastic changes to individual habits and connect them to a meaningful collective goal. We can use three principles for intervention design at scale, motivating change, socializing change, and easing-in the change.¹⁴ An example of this is using technology to deliver nudges or connecting incidences of wildfires with everyday actions.

13 Refer to page number 58

14 Rankine, H., & Khosravi, D. (2021). Applying behavioral science to advance environmental sustainability: an overview for policymakers. ESCAP Working Paper

Using the bifocal lens in moving forward

Bringing in the approaches mentioned above might change how we tackle problems that seem to firmly reside in the future. A more stringent application of behavioral science and hope that researchers recognize this urgent call to action is required. It comes with the realization that a science that is traditionally used to narrow down the microscopic lens can also help build the bigger picture. Because what eclipses climate collision, mass migrations, and threats to data privacy might just be a change in the perception of the urgency of the problem. Building on that is the push required to make 2083 look very different from what it otherwise might possibly be.

5



Reaction Lenses

How behavioral science and India interact



Integrating demand and supply: what makes a solution, a solution?

By Kriti Chouhan and Anchal Sharma



Making solutions scaleable means finding ways in which other people, organizations, or institutional bodies can replicate and adapt the solutions to their contexts.

India's supply-side solution is constrained by infrastructural and institutional limitations; as a result, most developmental goals remain unachieved despite solutions having been identified.

There are no two opinions about India being a land of diverse contexts that shape the lives of its citizens.

In particular, we see this in situations where social change or attempts to improve living conditions is pursued, by targeting either the individual - the demand side - or the system in which individuals operate - the supply side. Individuals seeking change and improvement form the "demand side". The "supply side" comprises the implementers of the solutions or the problem-solvers, such as governments, health centers, or civil society organizations.

One challenge particular to the Indian context is that even if the demand side has identified a solution for a problem, it is not a given that the supply side can implement that solution. Just like reaction lenses darken when the light hits them, turning regular glasses into sunglasses and changing their use, the usability of a solution can change with the context in which it needs to be implemented.

Situations of seeking solutions

How does the demand side articulate its quest for solutions? Here are some examples. A mother in a household in Bihar might make sure that her son and daughter-in-law do not discuss family planning. The result often is that the woman becomes a mother early in her marriage. Yet, having proven her fertility early on in the marriage gives the daughter-in-law agency and enhances her position within the family, increasing her decision making power, as Pooja Gupta

argues in this volume of *beSciGHTS*.¹ Thus while the situation curtails one element of choice—when to have a first child—for the woman, it offers the path to a solution in increasing the daughter-in-law’s decision-making power in certain matters such as those related to the child’s health.

In other matters, especially financial ones, the men of the household may still have the final say. For example, while the mother can decide when to get her child vaccinated, her husband still gets to decide how money is spent. Further, given that household members have different and often contradictory interests, intra-household dynamics play an important role in decision-making within a household. Within what Shriyam Gupta in this volume calls the ‘micro-society’ characteristic of Indian family dynamics, it might not be the husband who has the final say over a couple’s decision, but the grandfather.

The situations described above are typical examples of the layered factors that influence people’s lives. They are also examples of seeking change in different aspects of these factors, thus forming the demand side for solutions. Individuals or households like the ones sketched above have been at the center of many research questions that applied behavioral scientists have embarked upon answering.

How do you increase the uptake of a vaccine? Which behavior change strategies are most promising to encourage recycling behavior? To achieve better data privacy, how can individuals be nudged to be careful with their data, even though individually one might not currently understand the consequences,

if they are not, as Sharrma argues in this publication??²

Solutions as demand-and-supply driven

Interventions and strategies to solve an identified problem often look at demand-side solutions—meaning a solution puts the burden of change on the individual—as cost-effective, flexible, and context specific. Now, we have learned from Arakoni in this volume just how challenging it is to define that context specificity in India.³ So thinking about solutions as needing to be contextualised is already complicated. Distinguishing between the demand and supply side of a solution adds a further twist.

In our experience, applied behavioral scientists tend to strictly distinguish between the demand and supply side of the problem. Generally, the primary objective is to behaviorally inform the consumer demand, meaning that behavioral strategies are used to shape what the demand side requests. This means that applied behavioral research can miss the role of the supply side when thinking about creating the best solutions.

If individuals or households have the power of demand, then problem solvers have to supply. Yet, applied behavioral scientists have prioritized designing solutions mainly from the demand perspective, which creates a myopic view of the solution. Recommending solutions that have been tested with a population and seem to be working is exhilarating—and yet they can

1 Refer to page number 44

2 Refer to page number 65

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still fall flat because a recommendation forgot to unpack if the provider of the solutions (the supply side) can sustainably implement the most promising solution.

Consequences of a demand-side solutions perspective

Ignoring the capacities of supply-side stakeholders does not just potentially skew the research process and its outcomes, but has consequences for the realistic application of research findings. These consequences are three-fold.

First, the lack of input from supply-side stakeholders during solution design affects the credibility of information received and generated. It is a missed opportunity to not ask the implementers what they think is possible. The supply side has a repository of crucial information regarding the geographical and social contexts as well as the population in which research is conducted. Government bodies, private sector actors, development practitioners all have experience of interacting with and working on the challenges of the target population.

Overlooking their insights when formulating a research design can affect the credibility in numerous ways. Independent researchers, such as us, bring own notions to address a challenge. The populations we meet in our research likewise have their own perceptions of our research and of us, as Ashok argues in this volume.⁴ The social gap—or power relations as outlines

by Jagati and Sharrma in this volume⁵—can affect the information researcher may prioritise and the information research participants provide, as we learned from Jalan and Sethi.⁶

Research designs might draw on literature that is not generalisable to what are lived practical experiences, as Arakoni explains.⁷ This means that in the most extreme case, research may work with incorrect assumptions and hypotheses; correcting these takes time and continued learning and reflection. The interactions between the data-gathering dynamics, limitations of our own perspectives and pressure to deliver in applied research all affect the insights research generates. In this sense, researchers—we, ourselves—create an informational gap between us and the populations we aim to understand and support with beneficial interventions.

The second consequence is the scalability of behavioral science interventions. Behavioral science research is often conducted on a small scale, with a focus on individuals and their behaviors, often at the microeconomic level. Behavioral solutions need a supportive infrastructure around them to reach scale. While applied behavioral research is working towards the macroeconomic picture of behavior change across a multitude of challenges, it cannot put such supportive infrastructure in place.

To make solutions scaleable means to find ways in which other people, organisations or institutional bodies can replicate and adapt the solutions to their contexts. This notion is underpinned by the primary assumption, which is that the supply-

⁵ Refer to page number 13

⁶ Refer to page number 36

⁷ Refer to page number 58

⁴ Refer to page number 21
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side of a solution remains constant or unchanged. But is it? Often changes in demand will affect and be constrained by supply-side factors. For example, if we use communication strategies to improve demand for the Covid vaccines, can manufacturers actually produce the number required to meet the demand and do the health facilities have the staff required to vaccinate the daily demand? Can this process be sustained?

The third consequence is that we are missing tapping into a major resource which has both messenger effects and a signalling value. Having the support of supply-side stakeholders is an indication to the population that the solution might be reliably offered and suggest real potential for change. Populations might be more receptive to information or more supportive of interventions when they coming from a known, and reliable source. When supply-side stakeholders are visible it can indicate to others that a proposed solution has practical value. This could help create a community that trusts what is being said between the demand, supply and research side.

India's supply-side challenges

Our work in India has highlighted how the country is the epitome of the problem described above. India's supply-side solution is constrained by infrastructural and institutional limitations; as a result, most developmental goals remain unachieved despite solutions having been identified.⁸ It is thus imperative for the

community of behavioral scientists working in India to realize that behavioral problems cannot be solved through behavioral solutions that have been designed without taking the supply-side challenges into account.

Many applied behavioral scientists work with the understanding that our research makes way for evidence-backed policies. While 'evidence-backed policy' does have a great ring to it, it is also accompanied by the dangers of creating solutions that do not help as intended either because of inadequate infrastructural support or perhaps lack of buy-in, time, or political will of the implementers.

How do these challenges play out in practice?

In Haryana's rural Sonipat, work on promoting the use of injectables as a modern contraceptive met with the supply-side challenge. After detailed research with women and households around family planning, how they decide on and then use contraception, we developed and employed communication strategies. Though these strategies were designed to bridge the awareness gap and were rooted in the principles of behavioral science, they did little to change behavior.

We recorded intentions to engage in this family planning method among some women. This manifested as meeting with their trusted ASHA didis (community health workers) to demystify this new contraceptive method and how it might be the key to some of their family planning

8 Chidambaram, S. (2020). How do institutions and infrastructure affect mobilization around public toilets vs. piped water?

Examining intra-slum patterns of collective action in Delhi, India. *World Development*, 132, 104984.

troubles. But the women were often disappointed that their ASHA didis had the same number of questions as themselves, if not more.

But a crucial manifestation of the supply-side challenge was that the more proactive women (who often had learned more about the injectables through other sources such as the internet) when visiting their nearest health facility to get the contraceptive injectables, learned that the product was not available in their health facility. Having been disappointed, the women stopped trusting any further information or future campaigns around injectables and were demotivated to get the same.⁹ We realized that had we engaged with the supply-side stakeholders like health care facilities and workers in the area to understand what exactly they were able to offer might have yielded a completely different communication strategy.

Reacting to circumstances: Towards infrastructurally-supported solutions

In order to react to the reality of the environment—like the glasses that change their tint according to the light conditions—we suggest that in the Indian context, it is necessary to move towards what we might call “infrastructurally-supported solutions”. This means that any solution designed can only be considered a solution if the existing infrastructure within the supply side can reliably support and implement a solution.

Behavioral solutions that take into account the supply side, implementations questions of buy-in, credibility and scalability are becoming a lot less prominent. Infrastructurally-supported solutions mean that implementers are able to offer them—and reach the intended audience—sustainably.

This approach changes what a solution is: it has to fulfil two criteria. It has to meet a demand for a problem to be solved and it has to be realistically and sustainably implementable by those offering the solution. The only way to create infrastructurally-supported solutions is to look at the supply side beyond just as messengers or a source of information but to engage with them every step of the way.

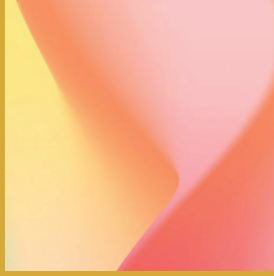
In applied behavioral science, this means that as researchers, we would conduct our formative contextual research (or what we call the ‘define-and-diagnose phases’), while also studying and understanding the supply side and its constraints. Solutions-oriented behavioral science must engage with solutions providers in thinking, designing and testing solutions. It is only when we create solutions in tandem with and supported by the supply side that they become solutions that can be implemented and will not be constrained by limited resources or infrastructure bottlenecks and limitations.

⁹ Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (2022). *Family Planning: Improving the uptake of injectables in India. Qualitative Insights*. Busara. (Unpublished)
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Unravelling India-specific behavioral mechanisms



By Krittika Gorur



The toss-up we confront in work is between looking at this forest of well-established behavioral interventions with a top view (or in the present age, a drone) or choosing a specific behavioral lens, like social influence, to look at the problem from below

By conducting a deeper dive into one type of behavioral mechanism, programmatic designs were tailor-made for the strength of norms and to target different types of norms—such as the norm that made the commute to school the problem for girls.

Do I start from a robust knowledge base and seek to apply this to the context at hand, or do I begin from understanding the context and then draw out from the literature what is relevant?

Enter the researcher's dilemma. Where and how to start?

As applied behavioral researchers, our quest is to unpack and influence the psychological worlds that surround developmental challenges. Usually, we start with an idea of a problem. Next, we dive into a broad-based diagnosis to capture levels of awareness, types of beliefs, and strength of attitudes within the target population before mapping these factors onto a behavior change journey to achieving a favorable outcome. We proceed to ask, 'What are the thorny barriers to behavior change and how can they be addressed?' We then jump into designing a suitable intervention.

Instead, how would the process pan out if we started differently: I could select one of the many well-known, tried-and-tested social change tools at the outset of designing a behavior change intervention. This would mean I presume to know how behavior change happens and would then fill in the specifics. Is my design a reaction to me knowing the context or knowing the pathways for change?

The toss-up I confront in my work is between looking at this forest of well-established behavioral interventions with a top view (or in the present age, a drone) or choosing a specific behavioral lens, like

social influence, to look at the problem from below. The angle chosen shapes how the problem is defined and ultimately, the type of intervention delivered. A combination of a top-view and ground-up approach will seemingly help identify relevant behavioral bottlenecks before centering a specific bottleneck in an extended phase of formative diagnosis and design.

Consider a physician who runs diagnostic tests on a patient with flu-like symptoms. A series of rapid influenza tests can determine if a person has the flu or not. Yet, to zero in on the exact subtype or strain of flu diagnostics using viral culture tests with higher sensitivity and specificity is likely necessary. Often, a choice is called upon between a high-level and a detailed approach in applied behavioral science. But there is an additional spanner in the works, many of the identified behavioral mechanisms come from a limited number of contexts.

Do nudges work the same way all over the world?

The Girl Capital strategy of the Children's Investment Fund Foundation (CIFF) promotes gender-equal opportunities across education, marriage and sexual health, as well as employment. We wanted to explore what the barriers are to achieving these equal opportunities. A top-view approach would have produced learnings about the various factors that pull away or push girls and their caregivers towards their decisions (picture Lewin's force field describing the driving forces that encourage a change and restraining forces

that operate against a change)¹. But is that the most insightful way to think about barriers?

Another of our projects sought to increase data privacy consciousness online²—with the kind of challenges that Sharma outlines in this volume³. It illustrates how the top-view behavioral diagnosis can lead to creating different behavioral strategies that could improve such consciousness. Our experiment compared what type of content was most effective to create awareness: content that framed a disregard of privacy practices as a loss, content that made policies more salient through visual cues, or content that activated a nudge to conform to the majority norm on the time spent reading the policy and willingness to share personal information.

In its simplest form, a nudge-inspired intervention that leverages social norms manipulates an individual's perception of what behaviour is common or appropriate.⁴ It seeks to motivate individuals to update their perceptions about what others are actually doing (descriptive norms) or what they approve of (injunctive norms). Social psychology tells us that this will encourage compliance because humans have a deeply wired need to belong and an instinct to follow the crowd's decision.

1 Lewin, K. (1951). Field theory in social science: selected theoretical papers (Edited by Dorwin Cartwright.).

2 Behavioral Experiments in Data Privacy (2020). IntAct, Busara & the Centre for Social and Behavior Change. Retrieved from https://busaracenter.org/report-pdf/InAct_Report.pdf

3 Refer to page number 65

4 Berkowitz, A. D. (2004). The social norms approach:

Theory, research, and annotated bibliography.

This is especially true for collectivist societies that value group harmony over independence⁵—like India. Using a norms-based nudge, the data privacy intervention tested communication that conveyed '89% of internet users who do not read the privacy policies before agreeing to share data exposed themselves to avoidable risk'.

This approach is well-established in behavioral science, which draws much of its learning from research done in the Western world. Yet, simply transferring Western-operationalized design concepts without consideration of the specifics of a problem in a different part of the world can arrest the kind of fresh thinking we need to identify how an intervention must be adapted to a vastly different context. Like small framing tweaks or commitment devices, these behavioral interventions are familiar, appealing, known to generate a sizable impact, and often top-of-mind when looking into the arsenal of low-touch nudges. They also offer a shared vocabulary to help situate cross-cultural findings on what works in India within the larger body of behavioral science literature. Yet, because the majority of behavioral science studies use samples from the Global North and skew to affluent, industrialized and Western contexts, a top view might present just that: a Western skewed view of behavior.⁶

5 Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (2017). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Interpersonal development*, 57-89.

Cialdini, R. B., Wosinska, W., Barrett, D. W., Butner, J., & Gornik-Durose, M. (1999). Compliance with a request in two cultures: The differential influence of social proof and commitment/consistency on collectivists and individualists. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 25(10), 1242-1253.

6 Henrich, J., Heine, S. J., & Norenzayan, A. (2010). Most people are not WEIRD. *Nature*, 466(7302), 29-29.

Translating approaches to different contexts

So, could I transfer the basic concept of the social-norm message strategy used to encourage data privacy awareness to the problem of girls dropping out of school? A similar intervention could, for example, provide rural households in India with statistics on how typical it is for girls in their communities to graduate from high school.

If only it were that simple. But sometimes, a text message informing people that their neighbors are making very different choices and would it not be good to make the same choices—such as sending their daughters to school—is not enough to make that happen.⁷

The team began the ClIFF project by focusing on social norm change, rather than by using a broad diagnosis of the problem. Assuming that gender roles and societal expectations of girls were the problem, we asked adolescents, their caregivers, and other key community members about who the people were who influenced their decision-making and their views on what girls/women typically do and should do. Then, we inquired how respondents perceived the social sanctions associated with educating girls, with delaying the timing of their marriage and childbirth, and their choice to work outside the home.

⁷ Prentice, D., & Paluck, E. L. (2020). Engineering social change using social norms: Lessons from the study of collective action. *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 35, 138-142.

In using a ground-up approach to unpack social norms instead of a top-view diagnosis of how to message people about the desired change, I hit on the rarity of space in our interview guides and quantitative surveys to dig deeper. I learned how girls' education and economic empowerment is impacted by other, all-encompassing beliefs about whether they can interact with the opposite gender or move in public environments, and gender role ideologies about who breadwinners should be.

There is nothing particularly surprising or unusual about such barriers in the sphere of gender equality.⁸ What I was able to grasp, though, were the subtle distinctions of these beliefs as they relate to the specific outcomes of secondary education, marriage, and work. For example, higher education for girls in itself was not expected or disapproved of in communities across Rajasthan, meaning education was not at the heart of the social norm that prevented girls from attending high school. Rather, it was the act of commuting outside the village by girls to pursue higher education that was looked down upon.

What a ground-up approach brings

Starting with a ground-up approach influenced my process for diagnosing barriers and designing solutions in two ways. First, for deeply entrenched social norms, it became fairly plain that

⁸ Jayachandran, S. (2015). *The roots of gender inequality in developing countries*. *Economics*, 7(1), 63-88.

low-touch interventions built on social marketing-type exercises of correcting misperceptions alone, especially for highly visible behaviours, were likely to be insufficient—no matter how effective they have been in other contexts. By conducting a deeper dive into one type of behavioural mechanism, programmatic designs were tailor-made for the strength of norms and to target different types of norms—such as the norm that made the commute to school the problem for girls, and not the school. This process compelled me to translate orthodox social norm design components for resource-constrained environments and to accommodate lower levels of written literacy.

Second, I found different segments within the same geographical unit to understand and interpret the term ‘community’ differently. While some villages considered their sarpanch (council leader) to be representative of their identity, others cited the head of their community’s caste, who was not necessarily this sarpanch, to represent their social values. Identifying elements of social norm interventions that could scale without adjustments from those aspects that needed adaptation between geographical contexts was, therefore, crucial. This made me question whether the traditional top-view method, which was set as my default, only begins to scratch the surface—especially for the Global South and, of course, for India.

Becoming India-specific

Because the value and validity of behavioral science in settings like India remains insufficiently tested and largely uncertain, it is necessary to further enrich existing theories that might fall short of explaining behavior in wider contexts. A simple xerox of the published menu of behavioral science mechanisms, most of which have been built and tested with Western samples, could lead us astray. So, why does a choice between top-view, rapid and ground-up, cultured tests need to be made? As a research practitioner, my holy grail was to produce findings that partners can use and apply, with a limited pot of funds and under time constraints. Giving ourselves more room in tight turnarounds and small budgets to understand the complexities of concepts, like social norms, is nevertheless crucial to account for the nuances that will determine whether or not we can change behavior with a behavioral science toolkit.

Before making a beeline for blanket approaches developed in the Global North, for underrepresented and diverse populations like India, it is important to pause and ask ourselves: Does this behavioral mechanism depend on the context?

Without much doubt, it will.

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