Chapter 2

Common folk beliefs

Why it's so easy to be wrong about other peoples' motives.

The five teenagers were sprawled on grubby armchairs in a grimy inner city youth refuge. They were pallid, fidgety boys, aged around 13 to 16. I was there to collect stories for a comic book about youth health. In the course of the interview one of my companions asked what they did for thrills.

What they did was, they broke into homes, rifled through medicine cabinets and swallowed any tablets that looked like pain killers or narcotics. They told us stories of intoxicated binges in which losing consciousness or injuring themselves seemed to be the whole point.

Just as the interview was closing I thought of one more question to ask. I gave the microphone to the youngest, most drug-damaged one of all and asked "if you could give a message about taking drugs to other kids, what would you say?"

He sobered up, as if assuming a great responsibility, and said "I'd say don't take drugs. They'll fuck you up." He looked perfectly serious. I glanced at the other kids to see what they thought. They looked steadily back at us. No one contradicted him. It looked like they shared his views.

I was gobsmacked. The boys' chemical self-mutilation was astounding and awful but what really confronted me was the erosion of one of my own cherished assumptions about the world. Surely people's behaviours flow from their beliefs. But there appeared to be no relationship between this boy's beliefs and what he actually did.

It was my first insight into the awesome chasm that can exist between what I assume about people's motivations, and the evidence of real life. I thought these kids were taking drugs because they were ignorant about, or in denial of, the damage they were doing to themselves. I was wrong.

It turns out that the beliefs people hold seem to have only the most tenuous connection to the actions they take in their daily lives. The assumption that "If people believe A is good and right; people will do A" breaks down in the real world. There is overwhelming evidence on this point, and most experienced change managers and social marketers, if pressed, will admit it's true. Why then is the simplistic equation BELIEF=BEHAVIOUR one of the most common assumptions behind projects that try to change the world?

If we want to change the world then starting with defective thinking about the motivations of other people is probably not a good idea.

Before we start discussing how to really change other people, it's a good idea to pause a moment and ask: When it comes to understanding what makes others tick, why are we so often wrong?

Homo Romanticus

The most amazing insights come when least expected.

Michael Gazzaniga was a graduate student assisting neurophysiologist Roger Sperry in his pioneering split brain experiments in the 1960s when he witnessed something that surprised him.

In split brain patients the left and right hemispheres effectively act as independent brains. Because the left hemisphere – which processes language – is connected to only the right eye, it has no idea what the left eye sees.

In one experiment the instruction "walk" was shown to the left eye of a split-brain patient. Gazzaniga watched the patient push his chair back and start to leave the room. When asked why he did this, he replied "Going to my house to go get a Coke."[1]

Gazzaniga was awe-struck. This patient's *left* brain – the side that processes language – could have had no idea why its owner had started walking across the room. Yet it was unflummoxed. It instantly created a reasonable explanation: to get a Coke.

Gazzaniga later wrote:

> "Our species can develop beliefs at lightning speed. We create them almost as a reflex. We now know that the left hemisphere of the brain – the one that attaches a story to input from the world – creates these beliefs….The left-hemisphere interpreter is not only a master of belief creation, but it will stick to its belief system no matter what.
>
> "Any time our left brain is confronted with information that does not jibe with our self-image, knowledge, or conceptual

> framework, our left-hemisphere interpreter creates a belief to enable all incoming information to make sense and mesh with our ongoing idea of our self. The interpreter seeks patterns, order, and causal relationships."[2]

Gazzaniga realised that humans are hardwired to interpret their worlds, and justify their actions, through stories.

It's in our nature to be story-makers and story-tellers. It's also in our nature to be enthralled by stories and use stories to rationalise and justify our actions. Stories are (as we'll see) the medium that carries change through societies. Our drive to explain also makes us compulsively inventers of stories that make sense of the actions of other people.

Because stories are about people doing things, they automatically have behavioural explanations built into them. That makes stories predictive. They act just like behavioural theories. For instance, we never just say "Ruth smokes a lot" and leave it at that. Instead we might say "Ruth smokes a lot, it must be because her husband Ted is such a creep." This leads to the automatic behavioural prediction that "If Ruth wants to stop smoking, she better dump Ted." Now we have a theory about how to fix Ruth's problem.

Such stories are, in effect, theories of change. We humans make them up all the time. We just can't help it, we're hardwired that way. And these stories are often self-serving – they tell us far more about our own interests, fears and prejudices than they do about the other people.

Unfortunately practically no one has enough evidence to invent truly well-informed explanations for the behaviour of others. As a result, self-serving theories of change tend to be the norm in everyday life.

That would be enough of a problem, but self-serving theories of change don't just stick to the scale of everyday life.

Presidents, politicians, CEOs, managers, and generals have exactly the same drive to invent stories that explain how other people tick. And they are hardly any better at observing or paying attention to real life evidence. When those kinds of people concoct self-serving theories about other peoples' motives, the consequences get serious.

Why theories are often wrong

Try this quick quiz.

Most litterers:
1) Don't care about the environment.
2) Don't care what anyone thinks about them.
3) Do care about the environment and what others think about them.

Surrogate mothers:
1) Are poor and easily exploited.
2) Are mercenary.
3) Enjoy bearing children and have empathy for women who can't.

Middle class college students become lawyers:
1) To make money.
2) To please their parents.

3) Because they've always dreamt about being lawyers.

The answer, according to credible social research, is 3) in each case.[3] [4] [5] I expect some readers would find these answers surprising and counter-intuitive. Why? Because common theories about the motivations of litterers, surrogate mothers and law students have in-built, unconscious biases.

When it comes to predicting what might change human behaviour, similar biases apply. Here are some common generic theories of change:

People will change if they learn the "correct" facts.

People will change if we "sell" the case harder.

People will change if they feel enough pain.

People will change if they are shocked into action.

People will change if the rewards are big enough.

The problem is that every one of these theories is mostly wrong. There's overwhelming evidence – from psychological experiments and from the systematic failure of real life programs based on these theories – that humans rarely change for these reasons. We'll touch on the evidence in this book, but first it's valuable to consider what makes us believe such theories in the first place.

Part of the reason is that they emerge from widely-held worldviews.

In an influential study 1000 Americans were asked to rate various reasons why Americans are poor. The reasons fit into three kinds of theories:

- Individualistic theories: people are poor because of their own lack of thrift and effort, loose morals and drunkenness;

- Structural theories: people are poor because of low wages, lack of jobs, poor schools and prejudice;

- Fatalistic theories: people are poor because of bad luck.[6]

These kinds of generic theories are called *worldviews*. They are the lenses through which people learn to view their worlds. Worldviews tend to be culturally inherited and are very slow to change. Because we tend to apply worldviews in a blanket way, irrespective of the situation, they bias our judgements about other people.

And of course those worldviews also become the platforms of political parties. When liberal or conservative parties come to power, their worldviews are transformed into large-scale social change programs. Conservatives, famously, tend to fund "tough-minded" programs based on the theory that people are best controlled by strong laws, harsh punishments and heirarchical authority. Liberals (at least traditionally) tend to fund more "tender-minded" programs based on the theory that people can be encouraged to be their best by love, care and giving responsibility.[7]

We are quite well acquainted with these grand worldviews, but there are also a number of deeper "attributional biases" that are intrinsic to human perception and exceptionally hard to avoid.

According to attributional bias theorists, there are natural, automatic, and almost unavoidable biases in the way we think about the motivations of other people.

If you look on *Wikipedia* you can see an interesting list of the attributional biases recognised by psychologists.

One of the most fundamental of these (called, oddly enough, "Fundamental Attribution Error") says we have an in-built tendency to assume that a person's actions are caused by the *kind* of person they are, rather than being due to their abilities, self-confidence, fears, or social pressures.

For instance, if we know that Ted drives a lot we might tend to assume that he doesn't care about the environment, or if he neglects his children we might tend to assume he doesn't love them. If that person was us, however, we'd probably say we drive because the public transport is crappy, and we neglect our children because of work pressures. That's attributional bias at work.

Attributional biases are everywhere. For instance non-smokers imagine smokers are more easily influenced by cigarette advertising than smokers imagine. Also, non-smokers underestimate the pleasure of smoking and the fears smokers hold about the health risks of tobacco.[8]

It's easy to see why attribution biases exist. We know a lot about our own motivations because we have access to our own mental processes (which, of course, we interpret in a self-serving way). But the only evidence we have about other people's mental processes is what we see them do (and which we also interpret in a self-serving way!). The result is a tendency to be comprehensively wrong about

the motivations of others (while not necessarily being right about our own motivations either!).

Worldview bias and attributional bias react together to produce two pervasive biases that have toxic effects on change projects. I call them "Man is Bad Bias" and "Heroic Agent Bias".

Man is Bad Bias

Man is Bad Bias is a cynical view of human nature that imagines people as generally selfish creatures who only do the right thing when someone is checking on them. It pictures humans as sly gain-maximisers who consume resources with little concern for the well-being of others, who gaily dump waste and costs on others and who form exclusive groups that compete ruthlessly.

Here's an example. When 486 law students were asked to describe their motives for pursuing a legal career 64 percent said they were doing it because it was intellectually appealing or because they had always been interested in the law. But only 12 percent thought so about their peers. Instead 62 percent thought their peers were doing it for the money.[9]

Here's another. When students at the State University of New York were asked whether they would donate blood for free 63 percent agreed. But when the same students were asked to estimate whether their peers would donate blood they said that only 33 percent would do it for free, a difference of 30 percent. That's an almost 100 percent misjudgement of the self-interest factor in the motivation in their peers. "The students' actions and attitudes may not have revealed them to be ardent self-interested agents," wrote

the researchers "but their predictions revealed them to be ardent self-interest theorists."[10]

If you don't hold this bias, you probably know someone who does. It's so legitimate and respectable that it's practically hardwired into the modern Western culture.

Robert Wuthnow in his book *Acts of Compassion* noticed that many people who performed genuine acts of compassion seemed embarrassed about their altruistic motives. Instead they were more comfortable using the language of self-interest. People's accounts of volunteering for charities, he noted, tended to overemphasise selfish motives: "It gave me something to do," "I liked the other volunteers." "It got me out of the house." If our culture makes us ashamed to admit our own altruism then it's easy to understand why we might overestimate the self-interest of others.

It's also possible that Man is Bad Bias is self-fulfilling. A study by Robert Frank asked Cornell students whether they would report being undercharged for a purchase and whether they would return a lost envelope containing $100. Three months later they were asked the same questions again. Those who had taken an introductory course in economics in the meantime became less honest, while astronomy students became more honest![11]

From the Declaration of Independence to classical economic theory to the rave party, the "pursuit of happiness" is supposed to be the sovereign human motivation.

But of course it's not. Here are some other motivations which have frequently emerged in studies of human behaviour: altruism, skill mastery, frugality, bettering one's community, love of luxury,

relationships, self-esteem, autonomy, freedom from fear, freedom from coercion, loyalty, doing the right thing, pleasure, playfulness, and curiosity [12] [13] [14] [15] [16] [17]. Depending on the situation, these motives have been shown to drive human behaviour far more powerfully than economic threats and incentives.

The problem with Man is Bad Bias is not just that it's frequently wrong, but that it *always* blinds us to the great, and often unexpected, richness of motives that actually drive peoples' behaviour. As we'll find out, getting a handle on the *real* motives of the people we hope to influence is vital for any successful change effort.

Heroic Agent Bias

Heroic Agent Bias is summed up by the phrase "to a hammer everything looks like a nail". In other words, for a given problem, we inevitably tend to overestimate the effectiveness of our own bubble of knowledge and expertise.

Heroic Agent Bias causes scientists to overestimate the effect of research; planners to overestimate the effect of plans; engineers to overestimate the effect of built structures; educators to overestimate the effects of knowledge; marketers to overestimate the effects of advertising; doctors to overestimate the effect of therapies; generals to overestimate the power of military force; theologians to overestimate the power of faith; artists to overestimate the effect of art; CEOs to overestimate the effects of corporate restructuring; and law makers to overestimate the effects of legislation.

Heroic Agent Bias is a self-serving bias that, conveniently, allows professionals to star in their own dramas, feeling relevant and important at the same time.

When it comes to influencing the behaviour of a group of people Heroic Agent Bias causes change agents to simultaneously overestimate their own power and underestimate the power of people's inner motivations and the situational forces that affect those people. At its worst, it leads to a "we know what you want" arrogance that practically ensures failure. The Second Iraq War is an outstanding example.

Heroic Agent Bias is marvellously adaptable. When thwarted it can swing wildly in the opposite direction. It causes us to take responsibility for success but deny responsibility for failure, shifting blame to others. When the failure is particularly stinging, the blame can be vitriolic. "We gave the Iraqis their freedom," pronounced liberal Californian Senator Barbara Boxer in 2006. "What are they doing with this freedom? They're killing each other."[18]

We want to live in a world where we exercise control over what happens. As a result we are all biased in favour of theories that see ourselves as controlling the course of events and we are naturally prejudiced against theories that see ourselves as irrelevant.

For engineers, managers, politicians and generals it's especially tough. Their have to believe they can control events. It's a matter of professional pride. If human beings turn out to be more strongly influenced by their inner motivations and forces beyond the control of the professionals then those professionals face the awful truth of their own feebleness - a humiliating and frightening prospect. It's so

much more comforting to believe they are in control and have the answers.

I suspect Heroic Agent Bias is the explanation for many failed change projects, both laughable and tragic.

A few years ago I was trekking in a remote part of the island of Sulwesi, Indonesia. One village, on a rainforest plateau days from the nearest road, was situated beside the clear waters of a fast mountain river. I asked our guide about swimming. He said it was OK provided we swam on the upstream side of the village. The downstream side was for something else. And, sure enough, it was the villagers' restroom, in fact, we were expected to crap in the water as well. Later, walking around the village at dusk I noticed a big new TV satellite dish and the guide told the story of how it came to be there. A couple of years before two Dutch tourists had visited the village and were appalled when they saw the river being used as a laterine. So they went back to the Netherlands and raised money for the villagers to build sanitary facilities away from the river. You guessed it. The villagers spent the money on satellite TV, something they clearly valued more.

A similar thing happened to the Chinese "eco-village" designed by the famous American green architect William McDonough. It was "a classic case of good intentions gone horribly wrong" wrote an investigating journalist about the project to turn the village of Huangbaiyu in north-east China into the nation's first ecologically sustainable village. The plan called for a new village of "eco-dwellings" to be made from hay and pressed earth bricks, fully insulated, solar-powered and facing south, clustered together in the centre of the village so the villagers' higgledy-piggledy plots of farmland could be consolidated into more efficient lots. But no one

bothered to consult the villagers about the project, who refused to pay for the houses once they had been built. "Why would I want to pay 50,000 to 60,000 yuan, which I don't have, for this new house? The whole village has no relationship to us," said one. The dismayed anthropologist who was evaluating the project commented "Even if the houses were more affordable and even if you raised people's income, they may not want to spend the money on a new house, they might want to send their daughter to high school or get surgery for grandma or open a small store."[19]

To be better change agents, the safest starting point is to admit that we don't know best, and our theories are often wrong.

How to make better theories

Being theory-less, however, is not an option. It would mean leaping into expensive and time-consuming efforts without having any idea about why and how they might succeed.

Being theory-less is also impossible. Our actions are *always* guided by mental theories or models, even when they're unconscious. The trick is to be conscious, adaptive and versatile in our theory-making. After all, the ultimate failure is not making mistakes, it's failing to learn from them. As sixteenth century philosopher Francis Bacon nicely put it, "Truth emerges more readily from error than from confusion."

Consciously adapting our theories, of course, can be tricky because theories have a tendency to often obstinately resist change, no matter how great a weight of contradictory evidence is accumulated.

Thomas Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, wrote that an accepted body of knowledge "does not aim for novelties of fact or theory, and, when successful, finds none."[20] Even when confronted by severe and prolonged failure "though they may begin to lose faith and then to consider alternatives, they do not renounce the paradigm that has led them into crisis."[21]

J.K. Galbraith thought so too. "Ideas are inherently conservative," he wrote. "They yield not to the attack of other ideas but to the massive onslaught of circumstances with which they cannot contend." As a result. "like the Old Guard, the conventional wisdom dies but does not surrender."[22]

Youch. Galbraith, who struggled all his life against deluded economic theories, would probably have liked the idea of Heroic Agent Bias. In explaining the persistence of bad theories, he wrote, "To a very large extent we associate truth with convenience – with what most closely accords with self-interest and personal well-being or promises best to avoid awkward effort and unwelcome dislocation of life. We also find highly acceptable what contributes most to self-esteem."[23]

Still, I'm optimistic that change agents can learn to be good at changing their own theories, even the unconscious ones. Evidence and rational argument, as Kuhn and Galbraith suggest, might not work. But other methods of demolishing bad theories show promise, like the "So what?" test.

Barry Hamilton, then community safety director at Western Australia's Fire and Emergency Services Authority, told me about his cruel and unusual habit.

His education team were supposed to convince communities across a state the size of western Europe to prepare for emergencies like cyclones and bushfires. Whenever one of them presented a strategy his standard response was "so what?" It was an infuriating practice but it was also brilliant because it shook people out of their easy assumptions.

Try it. Ask someone: "What would cause A to change their behaviour?" And when they pop out a confident reply, say "So What?" When they come back with a different theory, say "So What?" again. Repeat until they try to strangle you. This method does not necessarily create a better theory, but it's great at exposing and demolishing the assumptions behind bad ones.

Another way to influence change agents is inspiration. Let them see successful examples from other places. That means doing good quality desk research before you start a project and spending time talking over alternative approaches (Google Scholar is a great resource for this).

Here's a perfect example. An anti-obesity project in the UK aimed to get primary school kids to eat more fruit and vegies. The project team started by finding out what worked elsewhere. They found that most previous projects had tried to educate kids and parents about nutrition but had no affect on their behaviour. Some even had a negative effect, making kids eat more unhealthy food. They spotted a few projects that had, however, generated reliable improvements in kids' food choices. Looking at those projects, they saw three factors that seemed to make the difference: taste exposure, role models and rewards. So they proposed a theory that said, basically: role models + rewards = taste exposure = changed

behaviour. They made their project a test of that theory and it certainly seemed to work.*

When theorising the safest path is to adopt a stance of good old self-doubt. It's safest to assume everything you think you know about certain people is probably wrong. Every effort at change can then be a wonderful chance to learn more about those people.

Somebody wise once said "All theories are wrong but some are useful." Theorising about human beings is always going to be an iffy business. No theory can ever be perfect. And yet we can't *not* make theories. We are human and humans are always generating stories about other humans, consciously and unconsciously, for better or worse, whether we mean to or not.

Most of what we do as change agents is based on our theories, and since unconscious theories are often biased or half-baked (despite our best intentions), it's valuable to make theory-making a conscious activity. At the start of any attempt to influence the behaviour of others we should be able to state: "I believe this effort will succeed because…" and then make your project a test of that theory.†

Making better theories is the purpose of this book. It's designed to provide new windows into what makes other people tick and change. It's a compilation of what's been shown to work, and not work, when it comes to influencing groups of people to adopt new behaviours. Incidentally, the book also IS a theory of change

* I discuss this case more on page …….

† I'm a believer in "Program Logic", a planning method that forces you to specify a measurable theory of change BEFORE you begin a project, and then plan how to collect evidence of progress along the way. There's a paper on my web site *called How to make a theory of change* that gives a procedure for using program logic to develop a theory of change. www.enablingchange.com.au

(although that may not be clear until the end). Despite that, it's not meant to substitute for your own theorising. Rather it's intended as a stockpile of ideas, helping you avoid your biases, saving you the trouble of testing and demolishing commonly held theories that don't work, and suggesting some unexpected ones that might.

Nowadays everything change agents do is supposed to be "evidence-based". I've taken that mantra seriously. Hence this book is not just a collection on opinions. It's based on hard experimental evidence and the quantified results of real-life change projects.

What, then, does the accumulated knowledge of change agents, psychologists and scholars tell us about changing the behaviour of other people? Let's start with a critical look at the dubious track record of some of the commonest theories of change.

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