



BOOK REVIEW

Behavioral Insight

(Review of the book of the same title by Hallsworth and Kirkman)

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Abstract

Aim: The *MIT Press Essential Knowledge* series provides the reader with accessible, concise, yet interesting and completely up-to-date information. Till now, we have reviewed the following members of the series: *Neuroplasticity* (Németh, 2021a), *Anticorruption* (Németh, 2021b), *Collaborative Society* (Németh & Szabó, 2022), *Critical Thinking* (Németh, 2022b).

Methodology: Each part was written by excellent experts on the subject, in a language understood by non-experts, too. In this way, the current research data and results in the field of each topic can be really used. Nowadays, it is not easy to find in the endless set of information obtainable on the World Wide Web those that essentially provide the fundamental knowledge on a particular topic (Tidor, 2020).

Findings: Behavior insight examines the current and possible later relationship between conscious thinking and unconscious action processes. It also examines how to develop and use it ethically to the benefit of humanity.

Value: The book presents the importance of conscious thinking and action, which is so far only known to scientists.

Keywords: behavior, manipulation, communication, behavioral history

Preface

Behavioral Insight. What does this expression mean? Are the average people well interpreted? And experts and researchers of the other disciplines? What

phenomenon is this concept? Where and how could it be used effectively? *'This book addresses these questions by presenting the history, current practice, and future directions of behavioral insights.'* (Hallsworth, & Kirkman, 2020).

The authors are Michael Hallsworth and Elspeth Kirkman. Michael Hallsworth, PhD, is Managing Director of the Behavioral Insights Team (BIT) North America. He is an Assistant Professor (Adjunct) at Columbia University and an Honorary Lecturer at Imperial College London. Elspeth Kirkman founded BIT's North American office before returning to the UK to run the organization's social policy portfolio out of London. She has taught behavioral insights courses at Harvard and Warwick Universities and is a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at King's College London.

Review

The book consists of 248 pages, six chapters. The first chapter clarifies the meaning and scope of the concept. The second chapter describes a historical approach to the concept and the reasons for the rapid growth in its use since 2010. Five short practical applications of the concept are delineated in the third chapter, while the fourth one presents the applied methodology of the behavioral insights in ten steps.

In the fifth chapter, the authors examine the limitations of the method, the areas of validity and the use thereof, and its ethical boundaries. In the final chapter, the future of the method, its practical applicability, and the possibility of its integration are discussed.

Summary of the chapters

The first chapter contains a description and explanation of the main principals of behavioral insights. It means a kind of conceptualization. *'Behavioral insights can give a realistic account of how and why we act the way we do, allowing us to design or redesign policies, products, and services accordingly.'* (Hallsworth, & Kirkman, 2020). Behavioral insights provide an insight into the possible separation and awareness of our conscious and unconscious drivers. For a deeper understanding of the topic, it is worth reading the closely related and complementary summary: *'Hogyan döntünk? ...és hogyan kellene? How We Decide?'* (Németh, 2022a). It is an important feature of behavioral insights that we act consciously far less often than we think and we much more often

follow guided instructions from the outside world. For example: *'Since people use the presence of a salad as a shortcut for 'healthy' when judging food options, adding a salad to a hamburger meal actually makes us think it has 12.6 percent fewer calories than the same meal with no salad.* (Hallsworth, & Kirkman, 2020). According to the book, these automatic decisions, decisions made on behalf people, also have advantages because we do not have to think about them. But the disadvantage is that we lose control of our consciousness. *'In a nutshell, the behavioral insights approach brings together evidence of how conscious deliberation interacts with nonconscious processes to shape behavior. But it also builds on this evidence to propose new solutions, as we show in the following.'* (Hallsworth, & Kirkman, 2020).

In the second chapter, the authors delineate the development and historical background of behavior insights. They highlight three threads from Western thinking which help to understand behavior insights. The first one is behavior economics, the second is psychology and the third is how the governments think about the behavior they control. The combination of these three threads assigns the validity area of behavior insights – that started to spread in the last 15 years. The first thread is that *'Behavioral economics has an empirical focus on how people actually behave, rather than on how rational choice theories predict they should.'* (Hallsworth, & Kirkman, 2020). Psychology is the second thread within which dualism has been scrutinized which says there are two main ways of human thinking which influence our behavior. One is conscious, controlled and self-identified thinking and the other is the intuitive, unconscious and uncontrollable (Hallsworth, & Kirkman, 2020). The third thread aims at understanding that, since the seventeenth century, the governments have consciously sought to understand and influence the people they govern. The reason for this striving is obvious: if they understand people's decisions and their behavior in certain situations, they can predict how people will respond to certain government decisions. The authors provide illustrative and precise descriptions of the abovementioned three threads and the evolution thereof, which give a clearer picture of why it has become inevitable to deal with the understanding of behavior insights.

Behavior insights are presented through specific practical examples in the third chapter. Firstly, the framework is defined which has three variables: rules, instincts and information. (It is important to note that the authors emphasize that other variables instead of the ones mentioned above may exist. This is just a logical example of how the framework works.) The authors give the example of Germany's switch to green energy. Here, the rule is to switch to green energy at all costs, where three options are offered. The received responses showed that the majority would opt for the middle schedule.

To illustrate the functioning of the second (instinctive decision) thread, the authors cite the prevention of HIV infections in Zambia as an example. Here, it is demonstrated that financial rewards or subsidies are much less effective than handing out preventive tools recommended by experts with local experience among people.

The third (and perhaps best known) thread is presented to show how information is re-framed. For example, research has shown that more people apply to police work when presented with the challenge side of that than when they read the standard ‘we serve and protect’ slogan.

In the fourth chapter, we follow the specific application of behavioral insights through a job search methodology developed by the UK Job Centre. The developers of this process have set up a 10-step protocol. The presentation of this project demonstrates the wide range of ways in which behavioral insights can be applied as an effective tool for solving communication and social problems.

In the fifth chapter, readers are given a comprehensive overview of the limitations and constraints of behavioral insights and the doubts about the approach. This chapter is divided into three main parts: 1. The practical implications of behavioral insights, both in terms of quality and time. 2. Testing of practical feasibility of theoretical models. 3. Examination of practical delimitability of behavioral insights and the definition of their scope. *‘Behavioral insights can be manipulative. For example, ‘dark patterns’ are widely used to coerce customers into making decisions that are against their best interests.’* (Hallsworth, & Kirkman, 2020).

In the last chapter, the authors examine the future prospects of behavior insights.

It can be ascertained that in the first ten years of the terminology and implementation techniques of behavior insights, they have received considerable attention and have been put to concrete use in several areas of life. But if we want to maintain and perpetuate the future application thereof, further consolidation and stable rule system are required. *‘The approach has proven to be more than a fad, but the movement is still in flux; its legacy is unclear.’* (Hallsworth, & Kirkman, 2020).

Summary

Behavioral insights are definitely very young but already successful communication protocols with a high impact. The great thing about their applicability is that they can be used in a very wide range of contexts to improve public interest and thus human well-being, whether at governmental, municipal or non-governmental level.

Their future success depends on the elaboration of an accurate and ethical protocol and the widespread adoption thereof.

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