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Want to change the world? Behavioural science offers some advice

How do major shifts in society come about and why? Harvard Professor Cass Sunstein explains

A framework to help explain how social change begins and ends is a pretty useful tool for those of us who want to change the world. In his book- "How change happens"- one of five written by the author this year alone- Sunstein offers just this. In his recent keynote speech at BX2019, the annual Behavioral Exchange event in London, he explained his reasoning.

"Social change can happen at the level of major societal events", such as the fall of the Berlin Wall, "or it can be seen in things closer to our everyday lives", such as in the changing division of labour between men and women in our own households. Trying to explain these things by referring to a contagion effect is not enough. "That is just a re-description of what is happening", Sunstein said. Instead, he provided more solid microfoundations of social change with the following four points:

1 Everybody lies

Do you answer questions truthfully all of the time to everyone? Even when you think your answer may be unpopular? If you have thoughts that matter, do you express them because you think you should? Most people lie or do not tell the truth because of the power of social norms. The result is called "preference falsification", which means that real thoughts are sometimes kept private. Fortunately, not everyone expresses their thoughts all the time. Imagine that. However, this can hinder change. It's crucial to understand this concept as part of an explanation of social

change.

But if everybody lies, how would or could we know what others might think? We don't. Most of the time we are not sure. As a society, we are facing "pluralistic ignorance".

2 To be or not to be a zero

The second microfoundation of social change is called "diverse thresholds". This means that some act immediately when they feel they need to. For example, in the face of injustice on the street, some people don't let what others might think dictate what they say or do. They need no permission from anybody and in that sense they are "zeros". Others need "one" to act first before they do and in that sense they are "ones". Then there are "twos", "threes", etc. "Whether someone displays a certain threshold is more issue-dependent than personality-dependent", Sunstein said.

3 Can you see me?

"Social norm entrepreneurs" are those that speak out or act first when it might not be safe for them (or others) to do so. In Sunstein's terms, they are "zeros", which is not meant as a negative term. These people give social permission to others to speak out and can be found on both sides of events. In recent history, the #Metoo movement, Brexit, populism, climate change and other issues have all started with "zeros". Without them, no change would occur.

Since people talk to each other and influence each other, that is obviously a powerful determinant of change. The third microfoundation of social change is therefore called "social interdependencies". Do others see what the "zeros" are doing? "A social change or movement will only occur given the right distribution of thresholds [second foundation] and the right kind of visibility [third foundation]."

4 Some minds think alike

The fourth and final foundation of social change, according to Sunstein, is "group polerisation". It means that people are more unified, confident and extreme in their thinking and sometimes, their acting too, after talking with a group of like-minded people. "The Chinese government has demonstrated a deep understanding of this concept. They allow individual expressions on controversial topics. However, they are intolerant towards people calling out to meet at a specified time and place to jointly take a position."

Systematic?

Sunstein's analysis suggests that anyone – whether it be a private person, business, NGO or government - can effect change by understanding the factors that fuel it:

- People lie
- Some are agents of change while others follow
- Visibility is a prerequisite for social change to occur
- People take more extreme positions when they are with like-minded people.

Having explored the drivers of social change, how can behavioural and other social scientists put this knowledge to use? Can we build systematic change or stop-change programmes based on these principles? Or is this systematic implementation already occurring?