

Interview with Dr. Meera Paleja

Bio for Dr. Meera Paleja:

Dr. Meera Paleja is currently the Lead of Research and Innovation at the Office of Behavioural Science in the Public Health Agency of Canada. She is also an Adjunct Professor at the Rotman School of Management at UofT, whereas she teaches courses in behavioural science and marketing. Previously, she has worked as the Lead of Behavioural Insights and Policy at the Treasury Board and as a Behavioural Scientist at the Ontario Public Service. Outside of the public sector, Dr. Paleja has also worked as a Senior Associate at the BEWorks management consultancy in Toronto.

1. *Dr. Paleja, could you tell us more about yourself and your work in Behavioural Science?*

My focus over my career has been about translating behavioural science into policy programmes and prophecies in the public and private sector and academia. I'm currently the Lead of Research and Innovation in the Office of Behavioural Science at the Public Health Agency of Canada. Here, my multidisciplinary team uses mixed methods research to tackle some of the country's most pressing public health challenges. Prior to this role, I worked at different federal departments and agencies, the Behavioural Insights Unit for the Ontario Public Service, where I helped develop behavioural science interventions in domains such as health, education, environment, and I also spent some time in the private sector where I worked at a boutique consultancy specializing in behavioural science. In addition to my current day job, I'm a sessional lecturer at Rotman School of Management at UofT. I have a PhD and postdoctoral fellowship in cognitive neuroscience.

2. *What type of work do you do within the field of behavioural science?*

My team uses the principles of behavioural science and applies them to different policies. We use different methods and approaches, such as randomized control trial field experiments, surveys, online experiments, and qualitative research. Ultimately the goal is to foster evidenced based decision making specific to the problem area.

3. *What were the major highlights of your career in Behavioural Science?*

A project done with the Ontario Public Service; our group partnered with a municipality to redesign the fine payment due date; a notice that you get when you owe a municipal fine. We ran a field trial, where we measured different notices and which notice led to the greatest increase in fine repayment. We found that the notice that used the principle of loss aversion was most effective. It helped recover over \$9 million in municipal funds and cut enforcement costs by over

\$3 million a year. That notice is currently being used province wide and earned the team several awards.

4. *Could you elaborate on some specific ways that the Canadian government used Behavioral Science for public health?*

Our office works often with problems related to public health, such as vaccine confidence, antimicrobial resistance, combating misinformation around public health, and increasing trust in public health recommendations and measures.

5. *What are some of your challenges in implementing Behavioural Science based public policy insights? How receptive is the government to behaviourally informed solutions?*

The receptivity in the government is high; there's a favourable attitude towards generating evidence to make policy related decisions based on knowledge and science. I think the challenges are less about BE as a practice, but rather more practical aspects of using behavioural science such as gaining access to the appropriate data relevant to the project.

6. *How do you think Behavioural Science is applied differently in the public vs. private sector?*

Within the public sector, it's really about working on existing policies and furthering them through research to ultimately help improve wellbeing, whether that be on an individual level or larger scale. Within the private sector, its goals are often aligned with its organization instead, such as for being profitable or increasing customer engagement.

7. *How do you think we should prioritize our goals, as students who want to work in this field?*

I think it's important for one to try it out to see if you enjoy it. For me, I started out working at a management consultancy, which helped me figure out what I enjoyed and didn't. We had clients in the public and private sector and non profits, which is where I found myself most engaged in projects involving the public sector, specifically due to its diversity when it comes to project aims, and its goals associated with it.

8. *How do you think culture may affect the application of Behavioural Science within the public sector? As we know that the effectiveness of Behavioural Science based decisions may vary depending on culture, how do you juggle this idea whilst applying Behavioural Science within Canada or across different provinces?*

There are huge cultural components when it comes to behaviour, and is very much affected by culture and society. To me, it's not about taking an insight generated in Canada and applying it to different cultural contexts, but rather testing in each unique context. Therefore, I often enjoy experimenting instead of applying existing literature directly into the present problem, since it can effectively capture all the nuances of the existing context/ specific situation.

9. Do you think there will ever come a time where humans will eventually become numb to these nudges and biases as Behavioural Science becomes more prevalent in upcoming decades?

I think there's a distinction to be drawn between biases and mental shortcuts that may have been a product of our evolutionary history, and the actual application of these considerations when designing an intervention. If an intervention is used routinely, people may become desensitized after a certain period of time. However, I don't think the nature of the biases will be something that will change in the future, but more so us having to redesign based on the context, with the same underlying concept. As things continue to evolve, it highlights the importance of continuous testing within behavioural science to find better interventions for changing contexts.

10. Do you think that technology will affect the way we think of behavioral science or the way we apply behavioral science concepts?

Yes, absolutely. I think a great book on this is "The Smartest Screen" by Shlomo Benartzi. In this book, he talks about practical ways that we can apply behavioral insights and behavioral science into designing better web experiences. It's a very practical book, but the science that he draws upon is really quite rigorous and I was able to take those academic insights into a very practical way. As technology changes, behavioral insights can be implied in different ways. But, I also think behavioral insights are also feeding into how technology is changing as well. And I think that organizations and companies are getting really good at figuring out through experimentation and testing what is working better. It's something that is going to continue to evolve and we will never get to the end point of this, and I think that's why keeping that process of discovery as an ongoing thing is something that will just have to be embedded if we are going to want to keep delivering products and services that have human behavior and behavioral science on top of mind.

11. In what sectors or industries would behavioral science be the most prevalent?

I think just anywhere where you are dealing with human behavior, there's a place for behavioral science. We talked about tech. Anything to do with online retail could hugely benefit from behavioral science. Also, in-person retail could benefit from behavioral science such as banking or anything to do with finance or the way investors make decisions for example. That has very

strong components and all the core principles in behavioral science (decision making under risk). I think any time you are dealing with human cognition or behavior, there is potential application for behavioral science.

12. As someone who has been working in the field for more than a decade, how do you think behavioral science has developed over the years?

The growth in behavioral science and using the behavioral science approach has been very fast, in a way that has been advantageous for everyone. Today, behavioral science is ultimately about decreasing this intention-action gap, and minimizing burdensome processes and helping people get to where they want to be. Therefore, I don't look at behavioral science as this misconception that it's about manipulation and nudging people into things they don't want to do.

13. What practical advice would you give to students who would like to enter the Behavioural Science field?

I would say get as much experience as possible, whether that involves taking a related course, for instance, the behavioural economics course at Rotman, UofT. I think it'll give a good overview, but also allow you to learn how to work with practical interventions in behavioral science. Then there are also opportunities to partner with organizations where you can actually design a behaviourally informed intervention. Other advice I would give is to participate in research, whether that be an independent project or thesis; I think that would be valued. If you're looking to get into the field in a way that is not academic, then I would advise you to, say, find a supervisor for this research that has those connections to the industry, which would really allow you to gain access to a wider range of people and connections. I think it's about gaining experience and building networks with those in the field.

14. Could you tell us more about the course that gives you hands-on experience in the field of behavioral science?

I have a co-instructor who is Dr. Julian House who is a behavioral scientist at the Ontario public service, and we've been teaching this course for the past six years now. The undergraduate code is RSM450 (Marketing and Behavioural Economics) and we also teach the MBA, which is RSM2522. This course goes into the theories of behavioral economics, but it's a course that is very applied. So, you're working on applied interventions, you're learning about how to do experimentation in the real world, not just experimentation in the laboratory, whereas if you take your standard research methods course, a lot of the focus is going to be highly controlled laboratory experiments. We wanted to go a step beyond that and show you how to do it in a real world context and give you lots of examples and case studies of behavioral insights applied to real life, so, that's something that you could potentially look into. And then of course there are

online non-credit courses. There's this MOOC Behavioral Economics course (BE101x) on EdX taught by Dilip Soman who is a professor at UofT. So, those are also opportunities for further learning.

15. Would you say higher education is more important than work experience?

That's a great question. Honestly, I've seen people go down both routes. My general experience and what I've observed has been that if you have a certain educational background, then you enter into the workforce at a slightly higher position. However, you could spend the same amount of time just navigating your way if you decide not to do a PhD for example, and you decide to enter into the workforce after your undergrad, you will have those extra years of experience under your belt that you wouldn't necessarily have if you do a PhD. In the realm of behavioral science, generally I think I've seen that having a certain amount of education gives you an advantage but that having too much education might be a little bit of a detriment to you, not in terms of how it looks on your resume but just in terms of time and opportunity costs. I would say there are avenues and ways to do the same kind of work without work experience under your belt, but it's just a little bit trickier to get there. You have to navigate a little bit more. You have to network, you have to meet the right people. That's the way to get into the field. You have to be a little bit more strategic than if you just have a PhD.

16. What are some important skills to conduct behavioral science research?

I would say that the focus until now has largely been around quantitative methods, having strong grounding in experimentation. While I do think that is important, I think that another valuable underutilized skillset is in qualitative research as well, so I think that having that background in qualitative research can help a lot in designing really good quantitative research. It's really something that can help you identify in an evidence-based way what the actual barriers and drivers are rather than presumed barriers and drivers when you are designing your experiment. So, I think that if it is possible to obtain any training in that, it is beneficial. I think that the status quo is having those quantitative skills, research design, data analysis, reporting on the data, but I also think that if you're looking to get into industry, I think that aspect of having business acumen, professional writing and speaking skills goes a long way. Those are things that can be built over time, but I think that those are really important components of a career really in any field, but I think especially in behavioral science where sometimes communicating it is one of the main challenges. And if you are able to in an articulate way communicate what the field is and what benefits it can provide, then I think you have a big leg up.

17. What are your favorite books, movies and podcasts for those who wish to explore the field further?

There are so many great books. I mentioned “The Smarter Screen” to you. “Thinking Fast and Slow” is another favorite. Annie Duke’s “Thinking in Bets” is another one that I really liked. “What Works: Gender Equality by Design” by Iris Bohnet is a really fascinating book about how we can apply behavioral science and experimentation to further gender equality, so that was a really informative book for me when I worked in women and gender equality a while back, when I did work on self-identification and employment equity at the Treasury Board as well. I think that there are a lot of great books out there and I am not getting through my to-read list as fast as I would like, but there’s a lot of really good stuff out there.