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Tunnel Vision

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One of the great things about science is it can change the way we view the world. This paper will change the way we view many things including poverty, loneliness, time, and hunger. It is a tale about the psychological phenomenon of scarcity. It affects everything in our lives and connects individuals who appeared to have nothing in common. The definition of scarcity is not having enough of what a person needs and that devours every one of our thoughts (Sendhil & Eldar, 2013). If I were to simply ask, "Are you lonely?" To many it might elicit a reaction of, "Yes I do not have many individuals in my life." The question might perpetuate an emotion of despair or isolation; thus triggering the thought of scarcity of not having many individuals in one's life. I was listening to an episode of Hidden Brain called "Tunnel Vision" and am so interested in this new science that I purchased Sendhil Mallainathan and Eldar Shafir's book titled, "Scarcity." I hope this paper sheds a new light on how our perceptions of things and the need for change.

The year was 1944 and World War II was almost over. Europe was on the verge of mass famine. Aids workers need guidance on how to bring individuals affected from the war back from the brink of starvation. Researchers at the University of Minnesota thought they could help and launch a year-long experiment (Keys et al., 1950). A 2002 documentary made by the University explains how the volunteers were people who objected World War II but still wanted to serve the country (Radel & Guillotin, 2012). The participants had to go on a starvation diet.

The participants were 36 men most of them Quakers, Mennonites, and church of brethren members who moved into the south tower of the Memorial Stadium (Keys et al., 1950). Many took classes at the University as they grew thinner and thinner. The men became walking scarecrows. The men became so weak and bony that most could not sit without cushions or raise one's arm to wash his hair. Henry Shuttleberg, a participant, said he was disgusted when he saw men licking his plate after a meal. After about two months into the study he was doing the same thing and said a person just needed every single calorie.

The results had been published and even today have been referred to in academic settings for nutrition, famine, and eating disorders. The two researchers, Sendhil an economics professor at Harvard University and Eldar a psychology professor at Princeton, became interested in the study to find out what the lack of nutrition did not on the body but on the mind. This type of scarcity is an alarm where our brain is pleading for some resolution. The theory the researchers wanted to test was when a person feels something important is missing in life; does the brain start to focus on that missing thing? When something is critical, you can focus on it so obsessively there is no room for anything.

The conclusion a person could draw from the University of Minnesota study was the men could not eat food so that was exactly what they became obsessed with was food. Both subconsciously and consciously the participant's choice of conversation was largely centered on food and food related topics. In some sense we would think, since the men were given little food if one would get distracted he would be able to continue but what happened was the exact opposite. The men even talked about opening restaurants, memorized food recipes, and even compared grocery prices in different newspapers. The intentional diversions did not even work. At some point the experimenters felt sorry for the men and showed a movie but it was reported they could care less about the romantic scenes and just wanted to see the food. Hunger and food had captured their minds.

Eldar did most of his research on poverty and found an exact comparison in behaviors and tendencies to that of the University of Minnesota study. In other words, if starvation made people obsess over food and poverty makes people use all of their cognitive resources over how to make it to next week. A person's head is busy mostly of what we do not have; that is to say that just maybe the brain is wired to focus on scarcity by becoming immersed into our thoughts and much of our cognitive energy is put forth to what we do not have in life. This makes perfect sense from an evolutionary perspective. Imagine we have a person from 30 thousand years ago and only way to obtain food is by processes of hunting and gathering. He or she has to be able to do a variety of things like fetch water, build fire, and shelter etc. When that person's hungry that evolutionary system wants an alarm that says, "I really want to get food into my belly," and that is just the basic instinct of us all. The whole time, the system had been saying, "did you realize we are hungry, NOW feed me!" What happens when that alarm temporarily goes silent?

We often focus so sharply on what we do not have that our cognitive resources have no ability to focus on anything else in life. The term is called bandwidth (e.g., a person is downloading a movie their operating system might be a slower receiving emails) and the movie is hogging all the available bandwidth. The two researchers think our minds work in the same fashion (p. 13). In other words, if our minds are consumed with thoughts about something there is no room for anything else. Scarcity fills the mind with intrusive thoughts of what we do not have. It does not leave room for anything else, Elder states, there is a way to demonstrate this remembering a chain of numbers 37921546 but also keep in your mind 26712495 and trying to remember both sequences just complicates things. Research has shown a person eats less well, attention may be diverted elsewhere, and a lack of exercise. To sum it up, when a person is busy juggling other resources (e.g., how to obtain dinner and after what else do I need to do to preparation for tomorrow, etc) he or she may be forgetful.

The reason why our minds operate this way is because when we look at every detail becomes crystal clear. The problem is we cannot see what is happening on the outside. Look at it this way, a person inside the pharmacy tunnel is so attuned to her or his job that there might be a disconnect between the their world and ours. For example, an individual inside the poverty tunnel are extremely good at figuring out how to make it to next week, in fact, studies show the poor are better than the rich at making better financial decisions in regard to the short-term affected. Someone who is poor is more a concern with finding immediate solutions. In other words, scarcity is a trap.

Just like the poor focus on the money there is a correlation between loneliness and engagement in social interactions in a particular manner that results in a more difficult way to make friends. The lonely tend to focus on the friends he or she does not have. In other words, they may try too hard to be liked and appear needy. In a conversation, the only person to be so preoccupied with making a good first impression that he or she cannot pay attention to what is actually being said; the conversation wavers and instead of appealing as your true self, the person is seen as awkward or flat-footed. What may be the end result?

People tend to avoid the weird conversationalist. The lonely person becomes even lonelier. This gives a new way of thinking about why people who find themselves in scarcity seem to do things to an outsider that look socially off-putting or stupid. In other words, if that lonely person is in a hole; why would he or she dig themselves deeper? Sendhil says maybe we are asking the wrong question. The question we should ask is this the poor are not deficient but the poverty is what makes everyone less capable or what if this idea of poverty is forming our thinking. How do we know that this way of thinking is not just another theory to excuse a person's behavior proposed by two researchers?

Sendhil and Eldar thought if all this is true the same person when poor should produce a different cognitive capacity than when rich. They tested the idea on sugarcane farmers in India that created a natural experiment. An important side note; sugar cane farmers are only paid once a year right after the harvest. A month after the harvest he or she is pretty rich but like anyone who receives an enormous windfall of money might spend it too fast. By the end of the harvest cycle, he or she is considered poor. In other words, we see a month before the harvest farmers are considered poor but a month after the same farmers are considered well-off. The research tested the farmers long-term thinking a month before harvest and a month after harvest.

The research found post-harvest the force had better impulse control. Farmers who are rich tended to think about things that would help in the long term. This research added additional evidence that explains that farmers who have more money tend to weed the fields more regularly than farmers who are poor. Farmers who were poor only focused on how to make it to next week. In other words, the individuals used short-term thinking. To be perfectly clear, individuals who are poor do not just want to focus on immediate needs; it is all they can think about. Scarcity captures the mind just as it did in the University of Minnesota experiment. Scarcity can even lower how well a person performs on an IQ test. If you have been fortunate enough to have not experienced what it feels like to be poor, hungry, or lonely there might be another form of scarcity you might have experienced. The next form of being overworked and exhausted can produce scarcity of time.

What happens when the thing we are missing is time? When a person is so busy he or she has no time to breathe? The Hidden Brain gave a fantastic story of a lady named Megan. For as long as she could remember Megan had been driven; so driven, she told Shankar Vedantam that she would be Valedictorian of her high school class. As a freshman she took a sophomore level honors biology course and studied around the clock. She had thousands of notecards and would walk everywhere with them. If there were extracurricular events she would bring the notecards with her and she would study them until two or three in the morning. Megan says she wanted to be perfect at school.

She eventually got into pharmacy school and excelled. She graduated at the top of her class and quickly started her residency. The new schedule was grueling. She says she got into work at 5:30 or 6 in the morning and would do a round on her patients. Then have a team meeting and that meant Megan would go to all the patients again and check, adjust medications, etc. as necessary. Then have a lunch conference where the hospital had continuing education. In the afternoon, she might take in new and keep following up on her existing patients. The hospital staff some days left at 4 PM and others were at 1 AM then starting the cycle over again. She says a resident at the hospital usually gets one day off while working 80-ish hours per week. As Megan workload grew; she started to feel she could not waste a single moment. Instead of relaxing, Megan started focus on things directly related to her success at work.

It first started out when she came home; she would walk for half an hour, read, and then go to sleep. As the time went along she became obsessed with exercise because she never knew when she might workout. She would spend up to three hours a day either walking, running, or going to the gym plus working 15 hour days. As she began to hone in on what resulted in her professional success; Megan lost sight of what on her peripheral. What Megan did not realize was she was entering the tunnel of scarcity. In Megan's case, scarcity was brought on by a lack of time.

Megan was not going to the grocery store, had not unpacked from the move, clothes began piling up, her home smelled, and bills began coming due and ultimately had a lot of stress at the pinnacle of it all. She believes that may have been the reason why she exercised was to get away from a stressful

environment. Some might say, at this point, Megan was almost falling apart. There was something else Megan battled anorexia as a teenager and she knew she had to stay vigilant about eating. As she tried to stay cautious about her work she slipped back into some old habits. She says she was eating mostly vegetables and fruits all excluding the major food groups. No one knows better than a doctor or pharmacist about the importance of nutrition but despite her medical training Megan stopped taking care of herself.

One thing that scarcity can rob us of is insight and how our physical minds are changing. Megan had no clue she was heading down a dangerous path. The change only became obvious to her when it affected her work. She started to notice that she was nearly missing things as she was admitting, for example, a diabetic type I and almost missed ordering insulin for a patient. Megan reared back and thought there is no way I can keep up with this life. She was fortunate to realize that if a patient does not receive insulin he or she would result in increased blood pressure and that may result in acidosis which would put the patient on a ventilator (<https://www.healthline.com/health/acidosis>, 2018). In two months into the residency program, Megan's body and mind had withered and it was so bad she had to go to a residential treatment center.

Megan struggled with two things; her body that lacked the nutrients and mind. She had to find a way to manage the intrusive thoughts that have been consuming her. She had to learn how to just sit. The treatment center rules had been quite simple: no exercise. No exercise meant; no standing, jumping jacks, or squats. Megan's mind at first was filled with impatient and angry thoughts. She felt useless that if I am not doing something productive what is my purpose in life. As the program gradually forced her to do nothing she began to emerge from the tunnel.

She soon realized she had been so narrowly focused on one goal, do well at work, that she ignored the very thing she needed to succeed. Those moments of relaxation (e.g., watching TV or in Megan's case painting) and she had loved art as a child but put it away because it would not help in becoming a better pharmacist. Megan is the type of person that likes to master from a studying point of view something and then practice what she learned. Art for her was a saving grace because Megan could do painting that made her feel vulnerable without instruction of how. She even turned her office into a work room in her home. The room is equipped it with paints, chalks, watercolors, and anything related to art and she budgets time once a week to, without expectations, create something. Megan has returned to her residency program with a new outlook.

She started to do something Sendhil and Eldar recommend to all busy individuals; actually pencil into one's schedule time to do nothing. She has said one of the big things she has done was having a date night with herself once or twice a week were she schedules out the time to do whatever she wants; that might be watching movie, soaking in her bathtub, or creating something in her art room. She prioritizes that time and will not accept plans with friends. Megan is consciously freeing up bandwidth and as a result something strange has happened she is less consumed at work. Megan has said she has noticed at work her cognitive capacity has increased tenfold and is able to hold more and manage things in her consciousness. She is able to enjoy the company of others, her work, and the ability to do well at work.

The psychological studies into scarcity and bandwidth are rather new but the ideas are ancient. The ideas are to avoid distractions; keep difficult things in one part of life from cross-contamination, and to be present. Let's say there is a big deadline due tomorrow and you are spending time with your children. In that moment, you are not present; your attention is on that deadline. There may be minutes where you do not hear what your children are saying because your mind is worried about the project.

Tunnel vision is neither a good or bad thing. The times were it can be beneficial to you are ignoring out distractions but the question is do you know when you are inside the tunnel? The management skills of scarcity are at the core belief of having the instinct to recognize that scarcity is present in one's life. When you have made a conscious decision to do something else and have not let that scarcity intrude into one's mind.

Of course, Chad, it is easy to build free time into one's schedule, be present, take a vacation with your loved ones, and these strategies presume we have choices; however, loneliness and poverty are two of the biggest things that never seem to go away in life. We do not say we are going to take a vacation from being lonely. The researchers and this should be a general consensus in the population would want policymakers to design a solution that recognize how scarcity creates traps that many cannot expiate themselves and the rest need to stop preaching to those in poverty. We need to design social policies fault-tolerant. People make mistakes or bandwidth is taxed; we need to make sure programs are robust to when we do make a hiccup. We should start designing training programs or curriculums for those in poverty that are inattendance tolerant. For example, if we are absent three days in a row and on that fourth day we feel caught up but our current systems (e.g., AODA) are made to build one day after another making the fourth day pointless.

The individuals whom scarcity is time should ask the question; if this event, person, or thing happens tomorrow could I do it? If the answer is "no" you decline the invitation because life is never going to be less hectic. Preserving bandwidth takes conscious effort but most of us are going to say "yes" to new commitments when we cannot afford it. At those moments is critical to look up and realize we are in the tunnel of scarcity.

1. What do you think?
2. How did I do?
3. How can a person free up bandwidth?
4. Connect with me please....

References

<https://www.npr.org/podcasts/510308/hidden-brain>