



Opinion Science Podcast

Hosted by Andy Luttrell

More Influence Than You Realize with Vanessa Bohns

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Andy Luttrell:

I was a Cub Scout when I was a kid. I don't remember much about it, but I do remember knocking on doors to sell candy and popcorn to raise money. I'm, what, 8 years old, and I knock on the door of a stranger. "Hi, I'm selling candy bars for Cub Scouts. Would you like to buy one?"

And then they said...yes! They pulled out money and handed it to me. What sorcery was this? I just asked a stranger to help out my Cub Scout group, and then they gave me money—real American currency! This was power!

Fast forward to my college days when I got a job working at a Blockbuster Video. For children listening, Blockbuster was a store where you could rent DVDs of movies and TV shows. Oh, right...for children listening, DVDs were like online streaming services except you needed a small physical circle for each movie, and most of the time some idiot scratched the circle before you and you couldn't actually watch the movie. They were truly better times.

Anyhow, as an esteemed employee of Blockbuster, I was tasked with relentlessly asking people to participate in one promotion or another. And sure, plenty of people would say no, but sometimes someone would agree, and I would be like—"What's wrong with you? Just because I asked you, you're willing to actually get another bottle of soda?"

What all of this points to is that my powers of influence were stronger than I gave myself credit for, and it turns out...that's pretty common.

You're listening to Opinion Science, the show about our opinions, where they come from, and how they change. I'm Andy Luttrell. And today I get to talk to Dr. Vanessa Bohns. She's an Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior at Cornell University. For years psychologists have been studying what it's like to be the recipient of influence—what happens when someone asks you to do something or consider a new point of view. But Dr. Bohns looks at the other side of the equation—what does it take to be someone with influence? How persuasive do people think they are? In fact, she has a new book on this, called *You Have More Influence Than You Think*. Unfortunately we have to wait until Fall of 2021 for the book to come out, so in the meantime I met up with Dr. Bohns to talk about how we're often wrong about how much influence we have, why we get it wrong, and what it means for us.

Andy Luttrell:

So, I suppose one place that we can start is just to sort of acknowledge that the research that you do tends to focus on mistakes people make in their judgments or predictions, and so I wonder if maybe you could just sort of lay out what those mistakes are about. What do people tend to be wrong about according to your findings?

Vanessa Bohns:

Yeah, sure. It seems that we tend to chronically underestimate the influence that we have over other people, or you could say the impact that we have on other people. And in my own research, it's mostly about the influence we have by asking people directly for things, but as part of this book that I just wrote, I've been reviewing other people's work, and it also seems that we underestimate our influence in lots of other ways. We don't realize how much more people are paying attention to us than we realize. People like us more than we realize and that gives us more influence than we realize. And in some new work that Erica Boothby and I have been doing, we don't realize the impact of sort of these small little interactions we have with people, such as a simple compliment.

Andy Luttrell:

So, if you could, maybe just to set the stage, is there a prototypical study, like from your own research, maybe when you're getting this whole idea established, what are you looking at to show that people don't give themselves enough credit for the influence that they have?

Vanessa Bohns:

Yeah, so in my study specifically, we ask people basically how effective they think they'll be at getting someone to do something for them, and then we have them actually go out and ask people to do that thing, and record how many people they can get to do it, and then come back and tell us the answer, and then we compare their predictions to what actually happened. So, the very first way we did this is we had people go out and ask people to fill out a questionnaire, and they would guess how many people will I have to ask before five people agree, was our very first study. And they went out and then asked people, and while they were gonna have to ask 20 people to get five people to agree, they actually only had to ask 10. So, they had to ask about half as many as they thought to get people to agree to this request.

Andy Luttrell:

And in this case it's the same people making the predictions as actually going out and trying to do it. In running the studies, do you notice that people finally realize that they were wrong? Like when they come back, are they sheepish and saying, "Oh, that actually only took 10." Or are people... I could imagine people still being blind to it. Being like, "Well, today was an off day." But when you look at the data, you go, "No, that wasn't an off day. That was a normal day." Do people have insight into this? Can they learn that they have more influence than they realize?

Vanessa Bohns:

So, it's really interesting, because in the studies, it's like watching people go on this emotional roller coaster. They come in not knowing what to expect and we tell them you're gonna go out onto campus and ask people to do something and they just hate that idea. They're terrified. They ask all sorts of questions, like what if I can't do it? What if everybody says no? Or they'll say what

if it takes more than an hour, because we would allocate an hour to the task. But they have this expectation that it's gonna be awful and it's gonna be super time consuming, and it almost invariably takes less time than they expect and is easier than they expect, and people are nicer to them than they expect. And so, they come back to the lab, and they're in such a great mood, and they're amazed, and they kind of bound back into the lab.

So, you do see them have this sort of aha moment from doing the study, which makes... It would make you think that maybe people can learn, and actually there's a whole sort of game/industry built on this idea that you can learn from this experience called rejection therapy, that if you go out and just try to get rejected, that you'll get over rejection and realize that actually it's harder to get rejected than you realize. But at the same time, I think a lot of people say, "Well, if it's so easy to learn, then why do we continue to have this bias? Why does it persist? Why am I even finding it at all?" And I think we just in ordinary life don't actually ask people if we think they're gonna say no.

So, we don't test our underlying assumptions that most people are gonna say no, and so we don't go through something like this.

Andy Luttrell:

That's interesting. I know there's old work on disconfirming stereotypes and how hard it is to extinguish negative stereotypes. Because you go, "If I assume this person's not gonna be nice to me, I'll never approach that person, so I'll never know that actually that's a very nice person and I have no reason to think this of them." So, yeah, another example of like if the expectation is a negative one, it never can get extinguished. Whereas if people were like, they thought they were the greatest influencer ever, they would quickly learn maybe that they were overestimating, in that sense.

Because one of the things I was thinking about earlier today was like salespeople who just have so much experience going out and being like, "I just know that yeah, you have to ask a few people, but people will say yes eventually." And so, they're motivated by that. I was thinking of that when I was looking at the work that you did comparing asking strangers to asking people you know better, to think like, "Well, is some of that just experience?" That I go, "Oh, well, if someone I know I have heard them say yes before, whereas strangers I just don't ask them." So, is there any sense of like... You sort of brought up the rejection therapy in a way that made me kind of think that you were about to say it doesn't work, but now I kind of think maybe it does? What's the science on that?

Vanessa Bohns:

I don't know that anyone's actually done science on it other than my own studies, which are basically like little mini rejection therapy sessions. But, I mean there are a lot of people who believe in rejection therapy. I think it's supposed to be super intensive, right? You do this for a long period of time and you ask a bunch of different things, and the idea is not so much to realize that you have more influence than you realize, but to sort of get over rejection and not let it hold you up so much. This is kind of a different path, but I actually talk about rejection therapy in the book and how one of the interesting things about it is a lot of the proponents of it are male, and white or Asian, so

one big question is if you have different demographics of people go out and ask things, are they gonna learn the same thing? That it's easier to get things than you realize.

One of the other takeaways is that then you should just ask for things if you want them. This is your way forward in life, and to get what you want is to ask. In fact, some of the rejection therapy proponents will say that. Just ask and you can get anything you want. But I actually, I was part of this BBC series a while back where they had a woman go through basically what was like a rejection therapy session, and I found it so fascinating, because her takeaways were really different. She was having the same experience. She was like, "Oh wow, it's really hard for people to say no." But her immediate takeaway wasn't that you should ask more. It was actually like, "Oh, you should give people space to say no." She had this one quote that her friend said to her, where it was like, "You should never stand between a woman and the door." She had this very sort of different take on learning that.

But yeah, to get back to the question of experience, I do... One of the ways I do explain our effect and why it persists is what you brought up about friends verses strangers, so I think we kind of assume our friends will do things for us for the most part. And so, those are the people we ask. We assume they'll say yes. We're not surprised when they say yes. And we don't actually go and test our theories about strangers, when in fact we find in our studies that at least for these simple sort of face-to-face requests, that friends and strangers don't look so different. But we think they're gonna be drastically different, and that one reason could be that experience.

Andy Luttrell:

So, you mentioned questionnaires, getting people to fill out a questionnaire, which is always... I love that in, there are a handful of influence studies like that, where it's such a convenient thing to ask someone to do to test influence, given the other kind of work that we do. But what are some other things that you've seen that people feel like no one's gonna say yes to it, and yet they end up having an easier time getting compliance?

Vanessa Bohns:

Yeah. This has been one of the most fun things, is just coming up with other random things that people can ask people to do. So, the questionnaire, as you said, was just like a really simple, common starting point. And then some of our follow-up studies had participants go out and ask people to loan them their cell phone. And so, they would get someone to hand them their cell phone, they would call us back at the lab and say, "I have this person's cell phone." We'd write down their information and they had to get three people to loan them their cell phones. They thought they were gonna have to ask... I think it was like 11 people, and they only had to ask about six, so they were overestimating to a similar degree. We also took advantage at Columbia of the fact that the gym is really hard to find on the Columbia University campus, and so it's this kind of underground building that would be really easy to walk by and not see. We would have our participants go down to the bottom of campus, like the south end of campus, and tell them to ask people to bring them to the gym on the north side of campus, and they had this little cover story. It was like, "I can't find the gym, can you just show me where it is? Can you walk me there?"

And so, people would walk them basically all the way across campus to show them where the gym was. And they thought the same thing. They thought they were gonna have to ask twice as many

people as they actually had to ask. In fact, in that study they only had to get one person to agree, and they only had to ask two people on average before they could get someone to agree.

Andy Luttrell:

Wow.

Vanessa Bohns:

Yeah. And then we've done some other sort of again, more standard versions, where people are like, "Well, does it work for money?" And so, we've had people who were participating in Team In Training, which is a fundraising campaign where you raise money to do a marathon or a triathlon, and you're responsible for raising money for that race, and then part of the money also goes to the organization to support leukemia and lymphoma research. And so, we had people participating in Team In Training guess how many people it would take to raise the amount that they needed to raise, so it was something like between \$2,000 and \$6,000, and we saw the exact same pattern.

So, people were overestimating by about twice as much how many people they'd have to ask. So, they thought they'd have to ask about 200 people, but they only had to ask about 100.

Andy Luttrell:

It does strike me that there are times where it is difficult to get that kind of compliance. I'm thinking about raising money, like raising money is not a cakewalk, right? There are parts of it. So, I'm wondering, this doesn't assume that every request is gonna magically come with everyone in the world knocking down your door to do it. And some of it may just be like outreach. If you're not reaching the people, maybe that's what it is. But I guess is there sort of a cautionary note that you'd put on that in terms of this isn't to say that everyone can get anyone to do whatever they want.

Vanessa Bohns:

I mean, certainly there's gonna be limits, but it's interesting because I think as the limits for how many people agree shift, so do our perceptions. And so, the limits aren't quite... The effect, I think, we still tend to find even at these bigger requests. So, for example, as part of one project that I'm calling the Big Asks Project, I've been interviewing deans, university deans, who are a really nice kind of test case, because they don't have a lot of fundraising experience traditionally. They usually come up through academia. And then they're put in this position where they have to ask donors for millions of dollars sometimes. And so, I've been talking to them about what it was like to become dean, and ask people for these things, and even they express this sort of surprise the first few times that they asked people for these big donations, because as the context shifts, it's not like strangers are going out and asking strangers in the street for a million dollars. But the whole context sort of shifts, and so our expectations don't shift as much with the context. And so, you still get that sort of surprise factor.

And again, I mean it's clearly not in any of these studies is everybody saying yes. You're still getting rejection. In fact, half the people are saying no, like you could flip it and say, "Half the time, you're gonna get a no." So, it's not like you can get anybody to do anything. But the basic idea is that people are more likely to do things than we think, and that's even potentially on these sort of big requests on the sort of outskirts of big requests.

Andy Luttrell:

So, with the dean fundraising example and the sort of close versus distant other example, that one seems a lot about experience, right? I just... I haven't had to ask for this kind of thing before, and so I just don't realize that there's people willing to say yes. But you've looked at other things that explain, like why else are people not good at predicting their influence?

Vanessa Bohns:

So, as you said, there's this kind of experiential explanation, that either I haven't tested the water, and so my perception, I've never tested my perception and so I don't know whether it's true or false. There's also sort of an aspect of negativity bias, so I remember, as I said, it's still 50/50 whether someone's gonna say yes or no. We think it's a lot lower, but it's still 50/50. But if I'm so focused on that 50% who said no, I'm overweighting that. So, I think it's still much more likely that people will say no, because I'm so focused on those negative experiences. So, there's sort of this experiential element, but then there's another element that I talk a lot about, and that is egocentrism, or the fact that we really are bad at recognizing what the other person in a given situation is experiencing.

So, we're so focused on what we're asking for, and whether it's big or small, and whether it's an appropriate thing to ask, and whether we're gonna be rejected, and we fail to sort of put ourselves in the other person's perspective and recognize that they're focused on looking like a good person, feeling like a good person, and also being put on the spot and feeling like it's really hard to say no to someone who's asking for something. And so, you've got this kind of experiential side, but then you have even with all the experience in the world, you're still so focused on your own concerns that you're failing to fully account for someone else's concerns that make them say yes.

Andy Luttrell:

Which sort of may uncover the sort of dark side of this that I think you've alluded to, because I was thinking about it earlier today and I was like, "Well, that's kind of the uncomfortable part of it." Where it's like, "Well, what people are overlooking is the social pressure that people feel to say yes to things." And if you're a salesperson, you're like, "This is great! Let me leverage this and be like oh great, people want to get out of the situation by buying what I'm asking them to buy? Super!" But there are all sorts of other domains in which you go, "I don't really love the idea that people are feeling pressured to say yes to something and that we don't understand that people are feeling that kind of pressure."

And so, I think you've done some research work on this in other context, being that people sort of ignore that component in ways that have pretty ugly downstream consequences.

Vanessa Bohns:

Yeah, so that was kind of our next step. We kept upping the ante of pro-social things that people could ask for, and then we kind of shifted and wondered could this even apply to unethical requests? And so, we ran a few studies. We started small again and we kind of just tinkered with that questionnaire study that we started with our pro-social requests, and we created this sheet of paper where we had our participants go out and ask people to basically sign this sheet of paper and tell a white lie on it. So, they would say that they were supposed to be doing this marketing pitch

about a new course on campus. They would go up to people and they would say, “I’m supposed to do this pitch. I really don’t want to do it. Will you sign this piece of paper and just say that I did it?” So, just telling sort of a white lie.

And once again, they guessed how many people would say yes to this, or how many people they’d have to ask before they could get a certain number to say yes, and it actually looked exactly the same as our questionnaire studies. So, we didn’t see any difference when someone was sort of telling a white lie. But at that point, we said you could still potentially reframe that as pro-social. Sure, this person’s sort of telling a white lie, but maybe they feel like they’re doing it... It’s a pro-social lie, right? They’re doing it to help somebody out.

So, we wanted to try to come up with something that was kind of clearly unethical, that was pretty unquestionable, and so we came up with the idea of getting people to vandalize a library book. And so, we took a bunch of books that I had on my shelf, and we put library codes on the spine, and we told our participants that they were gonna go into libraries to make it a little bit more realistic and ask people, random strangers that they approached, to write the word pickle in a library book. So, they would go-

Andy Luttrell:

Such a scandal.

Vanessa Bohns:

We thought really hard about the right word, like what word is pranky enough where you’re just like, “Okay, that sounds like a prank.” So, they were supposed to go up to people and say, “I’m trying to play a prank on my friend, but they know my handwriting. Will you please just write the word pickle in this library book?” So, there was some sort of cover story, and they would just hand the book and a pen to this stranger and record what that person said for us and how many people said yes, and we saw the exact same thing. So, it was crazy. More than half of people that they asked agreed to vandalize a library book. For all they knew, it was an actual library book. And so, they would write pickle in it and it was twice as many people as our participants thought actually agreed to this.

Andy Luttrell:

And to take sort of the mechanism from before, if you’re to say, “Oh, did you know that so-and-so vandalized a library book?” People would be like, “That’s crazy. What a terrible thing to do.” But you say, “Well, no. They were asked to do it and they sort of felt pressure.” And you go, “Yeah, but if you wanted to say no, you could have said no.” And so, there’s sort of the ugly side effect, too, of people are failing... I assume that people are failing to account for this outside of just that two-person dynamic. Someone who hears about it would say, “Well, I would object on moral grounds. I would never do that.” But that’s because we don’t realize just how much pressure there is in the moment to just get that thing over with, that uncomfortable experience over with.

Vanessa Bohns:

Yeah. Absolutely. I mean, I think in that way, I think it’s very Milgramesque. And actually, the quotes that we have that participants recorded that other people said to them are very Milgramesque. People would say they would basically be saying like, “Will you take responsibility

for this? I hope we don't get into shit for this. And are you sure about this?" There was a lot of hesitation there that was kind of like I really don't... It was making it clear, I really don't want to do this, but I'm gonna go forward because you're gonna take the fall and I feel like I can't say no in this moment.

So, it definitely, I think as the person asking even, I think some of our participants came back and they were surprised at how unethical other people are. Not sort of recognizing that really the takeaway was how hard it was to say no to peer pressure. Right.

Andy Luttrell:

And it just makes me also think of sexual assault cases that we talk about, and how victims, there's this tendency to fail to understand this sort of social dynamic that's at play, and people go, "Well, they should have just said no. They should have rejected that guy's advance. And I would have done the same in their shoes." But to your point about that egocentric bias, you just don't... It's hard to understand what that situation feels like until you're in it, and so that's the other sort of ugly side of this. Where like, yeah, people have more influence than they think to do both the things like raise money for charity, but also to do these sorts of things that may fly under the radar because even observers are sharing that egocentric bias.

And have you looked at that, like observers of these sorts of scenarios versus just the people who are about to go out and make an influence attempt?

Vanessa Bohns:

You know, I don't... I'm trying to think of whether we've ever had a purely observer perspective and I don't think so, mainly because the big contribution that I've always thought of this work having is that there's so much work on actor observer bias, and this felt like not just traditional observers determining why actors were behaving in a particular way, but actual other actors in that situation, right? It's not just a neutral observer, it's the actual influencer who has their own set of motivations. And so, I was always kind of interested in the influencer themselves, but I do have some work looking at exactly what you were talking about, the kind of Me Too element, and looking at the question of people who, in this case it's coworkers, who make romantic advances on other coworkers, and whether or not they recognize the pressure that they're putting on people when they ask someone out, for example.

So, we have a couple of studies where we had people either recall a time that they had asked a coworker out on a date or pursued them romantically and that person turned out not to be interested in them, or we had them recall a time that they had been pursued by a coworker romantically, and they weren't interested in that person. And we asked them how hard was it to say no or how hard was it for the other person to say no, how uncomfortable did that person feel, and we asked a bunch of downstream consequences, as well, like did this person start avoiding you, or did you start avoiding this person? Did you confide in anybody? Did it change your behaviors? Did you consider switching careers?

So, we asked all these different things and what we found across the board was that people who recalled pursuing someone who wasn't interested in them underestimated how uncomfortable it

made the other person and how much that person felt pressured to agree, and also how much they changed their behavior after the fact, because it was such an uncomfortable situation.

Andy Luttrell:

To shift just a little bit, but kind of keep the light on that asymmetry between my experience and your experience, I'm curious what the allure of looking at an asymmetry is for you. I mean, all of this really rests on what people think and what people experience when they do it are inconsistent with each other. And there is, there's sort of a pattern of that. I thought of it because we just recently had this paper accepted where we do the same thing, where we kept finding this thing, and then we thought, "Oh, let's ask people what they think is true." Compare the lay theory to what we're finding. We find people don't realize that what we find happens and in some ways, that's just kind of curious to be like, "Oh, I guess what we are looking at is novel." And that, for us, I think that was mostly the function, was to say, "Look, we found something people don't appreciate." But I'm wondering if you think there's an applied or a theoretical importance of showing not just what people's expectations are, not just what people's influence is, but that those things are inconsistent. Why is it important to show that those are inconsistent?

Vanessa Bohns:

I think in the domain of influence specifically, it's particularly interesting to me, because we often wonder why is that person using that influence tactic, right? It's like coming across terribly, or they're yelling at that person, that person's never gonna respond. I think, I mean influence starts with the influencer for the most part, and if we don't realize what works, and especially if we sort of chronically err in one direction of either shouting too much, or not realizing that people are actually paying attention to us, or not realizing that when I'm in a position of power, I just... Like a mild suggestion actually feels like a command to someone who's not in power. Not realizing these sorts of dynamics that we engage and influence in all the wrong ways, and so I think it can be really consequential. It could be consequential in sort of the more positive light, I guess, where actually you just have to do a little bit to have a bigger influence than you realize, like if you just model certain behaviors, more people are watching than you realize and that can have these sort of snowball effects.

And at the same time, it means that we may not recognize the ways in which we make people uncomfortable, and the ways in which we sort of perpetuate certain dynamics and never hear about it. So, I mean one of the things I talk about in the book as well is how this applies in the context of systemic racism, and systemic power, that white people in general tend not to give a whole lot of thought to the experience of Black, Indigenous, people of color, and so because of that, we might make sort of an offhand remark and say, "Oh, it wasn't racist," because we're not acknowledging this whole background of experiences that somebody else is having. And so, there's just so many ways in which the fact that we don't realize the way our words come across to other people can have major impacts on other people for better and worse.

Andy Luttrell:

It's almost, too, like it uncovers what the solution might be, right? Because if it's what you're saying and you're going, "People don't even realize that it's having this impact. People are failing to account for these experiences." That raises a different solution than if people go, "Oh, I know full well this makes people feel uncomfortable. But it's what I need to do to get what I want and

so I'm gonna do it." That is gonna require a very different approach to solving that problem. And I guess there's a risk, the implicit bias risk of being like, "Oh, it's not your fault. Don't worry about it. Everybody has these biases." And we don't acknowledge this thing. Some ways, that can probably serve to absolve responsibility or feel like it absolves responsibility, but I think what you're saying is that it's really just highlighting where the solution needs to be targeted.

Vanessa Bohns:

Yeah, and actually I had to work really hard to not use the Spiderman quote of with great power comes great responsibility. But that's basically sort of an underlying theme in the book and in my work in general, is that if you have this impact, then you have that responsibility to use it wisely. Right? When you do something, more people are watching you. When you say something, it lands on people with more weight than you realize. That means that you have to actually watch your words more, and be more careful, and just use that influence with... take responsibility for that influence and just use it more wisely.

Andy Luttrell:

Did someone tell you you're not allowed to use that quote or was that a restriction you imposed on yourself?

Vanessa Bohns:

It was self-imposed. It just... It does seem a little corny.

Andy Luttrell:

Well, let it be recorded here that that's what you wanted to say.

Vanessa Bohns:

That's right. That's right.

Andy Luttrell:

I'm curious. Well, I have two things that are coming to mind. One is this idea of people are paying more attention. You just said people are paying more attention to you than you think. Which I'm curious to hear more about that, because that flies in the face of other stuff that we know in the field, right? So, there's this whole... A set of studies on the spotlight effect showing that people under, or sorry, overestimate how much people are paying attention to them. It sounds like you're saying the opposite of that, so how do those two fit together?

Vanessa Bohns:

Yeah. So, this is work by Erica Boothby on the invisibility cloak illusion or effect. I'm not sure if it's an effect or an illusion, but it's the invisibility cloak, where we feel like we're walking through the world and people aren't watching us as much as they actually are. And so, she does studies where she basically asks people, for example, coming out of the cafeteria, who were just eating with a bunch of people, and she asked them how much they were observing other people and how much other people were observing them. And she finds that we think that we're basically watching other people more than they're watching us, or paying attention to sort of what's going on, and wondering what's going on in their minds more than they're wondering about what's going on in our minds.

And she actually does have a condition where she contrasts it with the traditional spotlight effect, and actually the original spotlight effect paper has this reverse spotlight effect, which kind of foreshadows the invisibility cloak. And so, the idea there is that with the spotlight effect, they gave people this embarrassing t-shirt. They made them really self-conscious and they made them pay attention to this feature. And so, when there's a feature about us that we're feeling self-conscious about, we think everybody's looking at it. And so, that's when we get this spotlight effect. And the invisibility cloak, on the other hand, is when you're kind of just going about your daily life, just doing things that you don't feel particularly self-conscious about, which is actually probably most of our life, so more often I'd say you're probably likely to experience the invisibility cloak as opposed to the spotlight effect.

And so, Erica Boothby and her colleagues have this condition where they either just let people wear their ordinary clothes and ask them how much they think someone else who is seated in the experiment was paying attention to them, or they do the same thing that Tom Gilovich and his collaborators did in their spotlight effect paper and give them this kind of embarrassing t-shirt and ask. And what they do is the replicate the spotlight effect when you're given this t-shirt that you're really self-conscious about, but if you're just wearing your ordinary clothes, you actually think people are paying less attention to you than they are.

Andy Luttrell:

I wonder this, so at my university, we're kind of back in person, and so lecturing in front of a bunch of people with masks is a very bizarre thing to do. This is relevant, I promise. But I'm thinking like students who are in that large lecture class may be paying more attention to their mask and feeling like, "Is this on right? Do I look goofy? It feels uncomfortable." I'm paying more attention to it when I, the professor, do not care that... exactly your inner experience of wearing this mask. But I can tell when you're on your cell phone and you don't think I can tell when you're on your cell phone, which kind of to me sounds like what you're saying, right? That when there's some sort of highly salient thing imposed on me, I feel like, "Oh my God, everyone is paying attention." But the sort of innocuous stuff that doesn't even capture our own attention, we assume isn't gonna capture others' attention.

Vanessa Bohns:

Yeah. Absolutely. And actually, I even have a chapter in the book, or a section of a chapter, about the power of being in the audience, and how we tend to feel particularly invisible when we're in an audience, and I talk about exactly that, about how when you're lecturing in front of a group of students, there are certain things that just draw your attention and you're so aware of the student who's nodding, for example, and in that way, you're kind of attuned to that person, and if they're nodding more, you're gonna go with that train of thought a little bit more, and that in the end, the audience member actually has a lot of power to sort of lead the speaker on.

Andy Luttrell:

That's funny. I was at a talk once, I'm a nodder. I'm definitely a nodder in talks and things. And later on in the conference, someone came up to me and they were like, "Thank you so much." And I was like, "I had no idea that I was being that helpful to you during this talk." But exactly your point there.

I'm wondering, so a lot of the stuff that we're talking about is influence on discreet in the moment behaviors, right? Would you put pickle in a book? Would you do my questionnaire? When I think of persuasion, like the perspective I come from, persuasion is more often like opinion change and sort of changing your mind. And so, I'm curious, that requires a more long-term commitment to a new way of thinking, so I'm wondering if there's any... If you've done any thinking about how well this stuff translates to other kinds of influence, more sort of lasting influence. Whether this bias still emerges or whether people are maybe more calibrated and realize, "I'm not gonna change this person's mind." But maybe you can. Maybe people are more persuasive in that way than they think.

Vanessa Bohns:

Yeah. I mean, I have thought a little bit about persuasion, and I don't know necessarily if it would apply to more long-term effects, although the research that I kind of base some of my theorizing on does show some persistence over a couple of weeks, so actually kind of following up on this power of being in the audience aspect, my advisor was Tory Higgins in graduate school, and he's done some work on audience tuning and the fact that when we're talking to another person, we tune our language and our opinions to that person. And he's done work on the saying is believing effect, so as I'm sort of tuning my opinion towards another person, I in turn, after witnessing myself sort of say this thing to this person and seeing this person nod along to what I'm saying, I start to believe that a little more myself.

And so, to give a concrete example, he has this classic study we would talk about all the time in graduate school that we would call the Donald study, which has no reference to Donald Trump. It was from the '70s. And so, in the Donald study, basically there was this guy named Donald who was described in these decidedly neutral terms. But they were things like Donald doesn't change his mind once he comes up with an idea or an opinion. So, things like that. And you could, if you liked Donald, think that meant that he had integrity, for example, or you could think it meant, if you didn't like Donald so much, that he was really stubborn. And so, in this study, basically you were told that someone else that you were gonna describe Donald to either liked Donald or didn't like Donald, and you were given this neutral description of Donald, and then you tried to describe Donald to this other person.

And so, if you were told this other person didn't like Donald, you used more negative terminology, and if you thought this person did like Donald, you used this more positive framing. And this follows from a lot of other audience tuning work that... There's some classic ones on legalization of marijuana. You listen to like a neutral speech and if you think someone has positive opinions, you frame it more positively. If you think someone has negative, you frame it more negatively. So, audience tuning is kind of this established effect.

But the Donald study brought people back. First, they asked people, "What do you think of Donald?" After doing this sort of audience tuning task. And people's opinions shifted towards whoever they had tuned their message to. So, like they read this totally neutral version of Donald, but then if they described Donald to someone who liked him, then they liked him more. And then they brought people back two weeks later and they asked again, and they still felt more positively about Donald. And so, the sort of basic takeaway there is that if you're in the audience and someone

is speaking to you, they're sort of tuning their message to you. One of the examples I give is Hillary Clinton and when she got in all this trouble for all the speeches she gave to Wall Street folks, and people are mostly concerned about how much money she was paid and how there was this kind of tit for tat reciprocity built into that. But really, when the speeches were leaked, what was going on is a lot of audience tuning.

So, she's like just tempering her message a little bit for this group. And the concern is that if you're gonna tune to your audience, your opinion is also gonna shift from the saying is believing effect, and then over the long term, if you keep saying this message to people, that you could in turn start to believe that, or at least shift your opinions a little bit.

To get back to your question, the idea that I think of is that we think of being in the audience as having no power, like the person at the front of the room, the speaker, the person with the microphone has all the power, but in fact if someone's tuning their message to you, you're actually shaping their beliefs to some extent.

Andy Luttrell:

I'm curious whether the bias is still there, though, if people... I mean, this is all speculative. Since you said you picked from lots of different domains for the book, I wondered if this might have come up there, too, where... I think probably that example, though, does highlight that, that people don't think they're having much influence over someone's opinion, and yet they are. I think of it even these days in terms of like just are you willing to speak up politically, right? And just state your opinion? And that probably has more influence than people realize, right?

Or someone saying, "I think it's important that we wear masks when we go to the store." You think, "Well, that... Come on. I'm not gonna get into trouble voicing my opinion." But maybe that small little statement has more impact than you think it does. In which case we're right back to your overconfident or underconfidence bias.

Vanessa Bohns:

Yeah. And even so, part of Erica Boothby's invisibility cloak findings is also that we wonder about what's going on in someone else's mind more than we... Or people wonder about what's going on in our minds more than we think they do, and so simply by knowing, "Oh, so and so believes this thing." If I'm surprised by that, if you believe something different, I'm gonna start working to try to understand why would you believe that, right? More so than maybe you realize. So, just by knowing. You don't have to come up with this great, elaborate argument and explain why you think what you think. If you just say, "Well, this is my opinion." My mind's gonna go into overdrive trying to understand why, and that, just that process can sort of shift me to potentially shift my opinion a little bit, think about things I might not have thought of otherwise if I didn't know, "Oh, someone maybe I respect actually has this alternative opinion."

Andy Luttrell:

You mentioned sort of the contrasting the overconfidence with underconfidence of your work, and it is the case that what is striking about what you're finding is that it's so different from a lot of other biases that seem to show that people are so overconfident. They think they're better at doing X, Y or Z than they actually are. They think they... All these things that they are overconfident

about. But then your work comes along and says, “Well, but when it comes to influencing people’s behavior, people sort of recoil at that and they don’t think they actually have those abilities.” So, is there sort of a big picture reason why this domain is an underconfidence domain, when so much of psychology is overconfidence?

Vanessa Bohns:

Yeah. It’s really interesting. A lot of the work on overconfidence and better than average effect and illusions of control, a lot of it isn’t the social domain, right? It’s like I think I have more control over random coin flips or something. And so, because of that, there’s this missing step of perspective taking that is a key feature of the social domain. And I think, I mean it’s different depending on a specific effect, so there’s actually been a number of different studies recently kind of showing that we’re underconfident in this social domain, so there’s different explanations, but I think... I still think a lot of it comes back to this egocentrism. That we’re really bad at perspective taking and recognizing the impact that we have on someone else, what they’re feeling in the moment. Like in my study, is recognizing that they feel really uncomfortable saying no to us.

There’s some other work by Sebastian Derry, who’s done this work with Tom Gilovich, as well, showing that we think that we have less active social lives than other people. So, we think that we go out less than other people, and that we’re less sort of core to our social network than other people, and he explains it by looking when we kind of make an assessment, we’re looking at these exemplars of social ability, and saying like, “Oh, we’re not like them, the influencers and the social butterflies.” But again, it’s this is kind of egocentrism, that we’re so focused on our own lives, we don’t realize that actually the person right next door to us is doing the exact same thing. So, it’s interesting, but a lot of these findings do seem to be in the social domain when we’re seeing underconfidence.

Andy Luttrell:

So, the last question that I had for you was whether all of this work has affected the way you navigate your social world. Do you find that you make more attempts to get people to say yes than you would have before now that you know that those predictions we make about ourselves are not super accurate?

Vanessa Bohns:

You know, it’s interesting, because I think I definitely feel more confident that if I ask someone for something, they would say yes, particularly if I asked face to face. But that doesn’t necessarily mean I ask people for things more. People kind of assume that’s what the takeaway is, but much like we were talking about before, I feel like part of the takeaway is that in some cases, I ask for things less, or I try to make it really, really clear that someone can say no to me.

So, like if I need something that will make someone else feel good, I like to give the example of like when I was pregnant and I needed a seat. Everyone’s looking on their phones, they’re not really paying attention to whether this pregnant lady needs a seat, and sometimes I’d be like, “Oh my God, I really just want to sit down.” I started feeling comfortable just asking, because if I knew asked someone, they would say yes, and then they would frame the whole situation as being like, “Oh, I helped a pregnant lady out today.” So, I felt more emboldened to ask in those sorts of cases and less worried about rejection.

But at the same time, I'm really aware of power dynamics and how power dynamics can make us even more blind to how hard it is for people to say no to us, so like if I'm gonna ask a junior colleague, for example, to take on additional service work, or to do something that they might feel uncomfortable doing for whatever reason, I try to make sure I'm actually not asking face to face. I kind of reverse all the things I tell people if they want to have influence, so that I give them more space to be able to say no if they want to, and I try to make it really clear that they can say no.

Andy Luttrell:

Because as you are on record as saying, with great power comes great responsibility. Well, thanks so much for taking the time to talk about all this stuff. This was super interesting.

Vanessa Bohns:

Thank you so much for having me.

Andy Luttrell:

That does it for another episode of Opinion Science! Thanks to Dr. Vanessa Bohns for talking about her work. Again, sit tight until next fall to check out her book, *You Have More Influence than You Think*. But in the meantime, look to the show notes for a link to her website and links to the research we talked about.

And thanks for tuning in. You can learn more about the show at OpinionSciencePodcast.com, and you can follow us on social media--@OpinionSciPod--on Twitter and Facebook. You can subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcasts. Oh—and now we're on Amazon Music! Alexa—play the Opinion Science podcast...Ok, I don't actually have an Alexa in this room, but if you do—try it! It works.

Ok, that's it for this week. See you in a couple weeks for more Opinion Science. Buh bye!