Behavioural Economics - A coach’s view

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Each year, roughly 18 participants attend Roffey Park’s MSc in People and Organisational Development. Each is tasked with writing a dissertation on a topic of interest which counts towards the achievement of the MSc.

This paper presents the adapted contents of one of these dissertations making it accessible to a wider audience (the dissertations themselves are of a weightier variety). We hope that this paper will help stimulate and engage your thinking about your own coaching practice.

Holly Crane

Holly has been coaching for over 10 years, and enjoys working with executives, career-changers, entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs. Her main professional background is management consultancy and she has also worked at a thinktank and as a freelance journalist. She adopts an integrated approach to her coaching work, drawing on humanist, client-centred, systems, cognitive behavioural and positive psychology elements. She trained with Coach U and Coaching Development and is a member of the International Coach Federation.
Introduction

If you browse the real or virtual shelves of a bookshop these days, you are likely to find several best-sellers which draw on behavioural economics to offer some intriguing-sounding insights into why we as humans do what we do – and how we can change this. According to these books, behavioural economics (BE) can help us uncover systematic assumptions we are making, gain control over our behaviour, and understand ourselves and our natures better. Clients’ hire coaches to help them to do exactly these kinds of things. Yet, as a coach, prior to researching and writing this paper, I had no idea what behavioural economics was, and no knowledge of its findings in these areas.

So how can learning about BE help coaches be more effective? Put simply, it brings a new perspective to the familiar area of human behaviour and change by viewing it through a rather different type of lens. A coach’s view as they work one to one with their clients tends to be qualitative, holistic and focused on the individual concerned. In contrast, the studies BE draws on tend to be more quantitative, and to aim to pull out principles that are generally applicable. Each perspective holds its own pros and cons. Viewing the same subject through a different lens offers new insights, affirmations of and challenges to the alternative view. The intended audience of this paper is primarily coaches – but it is also relevant to anyone interested in why humans do the things we tend to do, how and why we can change our behaviour, and the things that can prevent us doing that.

The areas I report back on below address some familiar questions for those interested in human nature and change, through BE’s very different lens. For example, why do people sometimes have the self-control to stick to their plans, and sometimes not? Is willpower simply an innate characteristic, or are there ways to develop it? What assumptions are we making that we might not be even aware of? I found the new perspectives on questions such as these that BE offered me to be intriguing, revealing and to both challenge and affirm my practice as a coach. I hope you find value in them too.

Background and Scope

The foundations for these findings are the research into BE that formed my dissertation as part of an MSc in People and Organisational Development at Roffey Park, and my ten years’ practical experience and training as a coach. To be clear on the scope and intentions of the paper, I include here some important caveats regarding both coaching and BE.

Firstly, coaching. I am aware there are many different schools of thought and approaches to coaching - possibly as many as there are different coaches. With this in mind, I have tried to pull out insights, challenges to and affirmations of practice that are widely applicable to coaching, without assuming they will be universal.

In terms of Behavioural Economics, I have enjoyed delving into the field and its surrounds, but I am certainly not claiming to be a behavioural economist. BE has some rather unclear boundaries with neighbouring areas such as sociology, neuroscience and psychology, and my research did not aim to track which side of these boundaries it strayed onto. Rather, the aim was simply to discover what I could learn from the literature in and around a very different field to my own that might be of use in my practice as a coach.
What is Behavioural Economics?

**Behavioural Economics vs Mainstream Economics**

To understand Behavioural Economics, it is important to understand how it defines itself against mainstream economics. Mainstream economics has attempted to model and predict the economic behaviour of human beings – what we choose to consume, save and sell - in the same way that physicists try to predict the movement of atoms. The reason it does this is to make predictions about our economic behaviour. The way it does this is by making assumptions about general human behaviour, with only limited attention given to the underlying causes of that behaviour. This has meant modelling its predictions for human behaviour – to a degree very successfully – on some assumptions built more with simplicity than psychological accuracy in mind. Three of the key assumptions that mainstream economics holds about man in its predictive modelling of the world are that we are rational, self-interested, and self-controlled. BE challenges each of these.

Leading behavioural economist Richard Thaler points out that humans are dumber, nicer, and weaker than Homo Economicus. He labels the rational, self-interested and self-controlled humans of mainstream economics models as an imaginary species known as Econs, in contrast to our real species of often seemingly irrational, sometimes socially-driven and not always entirely self-controlled Humans. (Thaler and Sunstein 2009).

The parts of Behavioural Economics, of most interest for coaches (or anyone interested in human nature) lie in the detailed study of the differences between these two ‘species’, Econs and Humans. In its earnest search for supportable ways of challenging traditional economist’s simplified assumptions about human behaviour, BE has drawn on and initiated some interesting research insights that it claims shed new light on how humans behave. Gallup, for example, describes applied behavioural economics as “the mathematical description of the role human nature plays in just about... everything.” (Gallup Consulting, 2009). If a mathematical equation for human nature has been mapped, then wouldn’t you want to know what it was and how it could be applied in a coaching context?

**Nothing New?**

Even behavioural economists will admit that most of the field’s ideas are not new. (Camerer and Lowenstein 2002). Because it borrows from a range of sources, BE can sometimes appear to those familiar with a source as though it is repackaging an established psychological idea and claiming it as a newly discovered truth. Certainly some of BE’s insights will not come as of much a surprise to coaches as they may to mainstream economists. Even so, as a coach I found plenty of new data and perspectives, alongside value in confirming some familiar ideas.
Why we might not know as much as we think: What Behavioural Economics tells us about our cognitive limitations

Behavioural Economics identifies a variety of cognitive limitations from biases to mental shortcuts that challenge the view of mainstream economics that humans are entirely rational. This section looks in more detail at some of the field’s explanations of limitations on how we think and decide, and explores how these insights might change the way we approach working with our clients. Identifying limitations in our thinking is important for us as coaches, because part of our role is to help clients uncover assumptions that could be holding them back.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SYSTEM 1 and SYSTEM 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overview:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System 1 represents our more intuitive, unconscious side, and System 2 our more rational, conscious side. The idea of two sides to us with these different characteristics is familiar to me. However, BE seems to privilege and draw more on the rational, and coaching to privilege and draw more on the intuitive.</td>
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<tr>
<td>My Learning:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The rational and the intuitive work most powerfully together as they each have only part of the picture; I will rely on a balance of the two in my practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application Examples:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swapping the question ‘What is your gut telling you?’ (intuition) to ‘What is your heart telling you and what is your head telling you?’ (balanced); balancing the attention I pay to my thinking as well as my intuition when I am coaching.</td>
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What's this?
System 1 and System 2 are terms used by Kahneman (2011) to describe two complementary but very different ways we navigate the world. System 1 represents our more intuitive unconscious side. System 2 is our rational, conscious side.

What did I learn?
Kahneman argues that System 1 has flaws: it “answers easier questions than the one it has been asked”; and it has “little understanding of logic and statistics.” My coaching training has tended to focus more on System 1 and emphasise intuition and feeling. Gallwey (2010) for example – seen by many as one of the early pioneers of the coaching approach – advocates helping clients quieten their conscious mind (which he calls Self 1 and I see as similar to System 2) so they can “hear” their unconscious (which he calls Self 2 and I see as similar to System 1). As a coach, I had already found Gallwey’s approach powerful, and experienced the impact of asking questions drawing on clients’ intuitive side, such as “What does your gut tell you?”

My reading reminded me that a balance between rational and intuitive is important. Kahneman explains that things go best when the two systems work well together: imagine you’re walking along a busy street without really paying attention to the dozens of people passing by. Suddenly, in the crowd you spot a familiar face, an old acquaintance who you thought was living in Australia. In an instant, you’re alert and focussed on them, thinking about what they’re doing here: are they back on holiday? Or did they never leave?

This was System 1 picking up on something that does not fit with its view of the world, and flagging this up for System 2 to make sense of.

How is this relevant for coaching?
BE’s focus on System 2 is a useful challenge for coaches. But it doesn’t mean one system is “better” than another: This isn’t a competition between two sides. It’s about trying to ensure that two tools in our bag are used together properly.

In my coaching, I have continued to value the intuitive, but also make sure I consider the rational. For example, instead of only asking about the client’s gut feeling, I would now be more likely to recast that question as: ‘What is your head telling you, and what is your heart telling you?’ In other words, focus the client’s attention on the signals they are getting from both System 1 and 2.
INVISIBLE GORILLAS

Overview: When people are shown a video of two teams playing basketball and asked to count the passes made by the team wearing white, a surprising number of people (including me) do not notice the very obvious gorilla that appears in the middle of the clip and dances around the court, alongside the opposing team who are wearing black.

My Learning: My clients may miss some important things that would be surprisingly obvious if they weren’t focusing their attention elsewhere. The same applies to me as coach.

Application Examples: Sharing the clip with a group of career changers to illustrate that they may be missing obvious job leads within their own network if they are not directing their attention to look for them; exploring what my own gorillas might be, in supervision.

What’s this?
A striking piece of research Kahneman uses to illustrate the way System 1 and System 2 can work together – or sometimes fail to. Simons and Chabris (1999) asked people to watch a video of a basketball game, and to count the number of passes one team makes. During play, a large gorilla appears on the court and dances around. A surprising number of people, around about half, fail to notice the gorilla at all.

1 Accessed via this clip: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo (first access date 16th December 2011)
What did I learn?

While System 1 usually automatically scans for relevant anomalies in the environment, it can miss some surprisingly seeming things – particularly when its attention has been directed elsewhere by System 2. So we can easily miss even things that are apparently obvious if our focus is elsewhere. In addition, we are “blind to our blindness”, not realising - or not accepting - how easily we can miss things most people who miss the gorilla simply don’t believe it when they’re told about.

How is this relevant for coaching?

The gorilla film itself can be a useful coaching tool, offering clients a quick and powerful shift in understanding just how much they may be missing. For example in career coaching showing it to a career-changer to illustrate that they may be missing obvious job leads within their own network, if they are not directing their attention to look for them. More generally, it’s a lesson of the need to challenge clients about their assumptions, reminding them that they might be in danger of missing a gorilla in their environment – and missing the fact they are missing it.

The lesson applies to coaches too: if our attention as coaches is focused on the same thing as the client, we may be missing the same gorillas. Group supervision with other coaches and an experienced supervisor can help us spot and pay attention to things that might otherwise pass us by.

APPLICATION TIPS

If you’re showing the film to a group, ask everyone to remain silent throughout. Some people do see the gorilla or have seen the clip before – don’t let them spoil the surprise.

Some people feel confused and even embarrassed about missing the gorilla. A good way to help them over that is by pointing out the statistics showing just how many people do the same – it really is quite common.
COGNITIVE ILLUSIONS: HEURISTICS AND BIASES

Overview: Visual illusions (like the Muller-Lyer illusion shown here, which makes one line appear longer although both are equal size) are commonly accepted. Many cognitive illusions have now also been proposed and tested. These are thought to arise from ‘short cuts’ System 1 (intuitive) takes in understanding the world that are usually valid but not 100% reliable.

My Learning: Both my client and I may be making similar and frequent assumptions about the world that we are unaware of. The literature from BE and surrounding fields may help me to identify and highlight these to my clients or avoid them myself.

Application Example: Varies per illusion. One proposed illusion suggests that if we find it hard to recall examples of something happening, we assume it is less likely to be true. If this is so, then when trying to build a client’s confidence about their assertiveness, I may be better asking them to think of 3 positive eg’s (easy to recall) than 10 (harder to recall).

What’s this? Kahneman (2011) argues that humans do not just suffer from visual illusions such as the one pictured above but also from illusions of thought: cognitive illusions. Or in other words, heuristics and their resulting cognitive biases. Essentially, these are shortcuts in thinking that System 1 takes in the way it quickly – but therefore not always totally accurately – views the world.
**What did I learn?**

These shortcuts allow us to reach everyday decisions fast without needing to consciously consider the pros and cons of many options each time. But they can also mislead us without our conscious knowledge - just as a quick glance at the Muller-Lyer illusion above leaves us thinking that the two lines are of different lengths. Biases and heuristics include:

**Availability:** We assume that certain events are more common than they actually are because they are easier to imagine or recall. This is especially true of traumatic or painful events. As a result, people are often more afraid of shark attacks than mosquito bites, even though malaria kills millions more people than sharks.

**Loss Aversion:** We are more willing to take risks to avoid losses than we are to make gains.

**Framing:** The way different options are framed or presented impacts the decisions we make. If one is presented as a loss, and the other as neutral or as a gain, then we will avoid the apparent loss – even when the two outcomes are mathematically identical.

**Defaults:** We are strongly influenced by the default options presented to us. For example, people are much more likely to fail to opt out of an automatic pension enrolment than they are to take the action to opt in to a voluntary scheme.

**How is this relevant for coaching?**

Thinking about the various biases and heuristics has given me food for thought when it comes to my coaching. Examples of how one or two of the biases have stimulated my thinking are as below:

**Availability:** Bazerman and Moore (2009) recount an experiment illustrating a bias linked to the availability heuristic. Subjects were asked to remember differing numbers of instances when they had been assertive. Subjects asked to recall six events later reported feeling more confident than those asked to recall twelve: the availability heuristic shaped their conclusions. In other words, subjects that were asked to recall more examples had a harder time doing so and as a result concluded that they were less assertive. This suggests coaches working on a client’s confidence should beware asking for too many examples of past positive behaviour and focus on a smaller, easily-recalled number – or we may be doing more to lower their confidence than build it.

**Defaults:** The research here suggests that challenging the client to look at the things they do because they have always been done that way is likely to uncover new possibilities. These might be the very options that the client needs to change in order to get the results they want. A coach might ask: “What are you assuming is just ‘the way things are done’ that you could shift here to get the outcome that you want?”

**APPLICATION TIPS**

Question how universally any research will apply. Clients’ reactions will vary per individual, per context, and per culture for example – so remember the insights in this area are great pointers and guides rather than absolutes.

Pay attention to spotting your own biases as well as the client’s in order to expand your range and value as a coach. For example you might explore for yourself in supervision what frames and defaults you are unconsciously bringing to your coaching questions and set up communication.
Emotional, Visceral and Somatic Factors: Why Our Head Will Never Rule Our Heart

This section focuses on a recent and emerging focus of research within BE: the influence of emotions (and other non-cognitive drives) on our human decision-making and behaviour. Where the study of cognition is firmly entwined with the roots of BE, the study of emotion and its effect on us is arguably at the frontiers of behavioural economics (Camerer et al Eds 2004). The impact of emotion on our behaviour was of no surprise to me as a coach, but I found some new and interesting perspectives on how it impacts our behaviour in the thinking I came across through the BE literature.

MODERN DAY SIRENS: VISCERAL FACTORS AND HOT/COLD EMPATHY GAPS

| Overview: | Like the tempting sirens in the story of Ulysses who had lured many towards them (and thus to certain death) with their beautiful song, visceral factors repeatedly lure us to act against our longer-term interests. Unfortunately, unlike Ulysses, we suffer from hot/cold empathy gaps, meaning we have a tendency to consistently and mistakenly believe that we will be able to resist the siren calls when we hear them |
| My Learning: | Clients may be more likely to make commitments to act that they genuinely believe they will keep, but don’t, than I had previously thought |
| Application Example: | Offering clients the suggestion of doing a ‘test run’ of new ways of acting, and looking for external commitments to minimise need for willpower |
What’s this?

Our emotional state and other ‘visceral’ drives are enormously influential on our decision-making. Like the tempting sirens in the story of Ulysses who lured many towards them (and thus to certain death) with their beautiful song, visceral factors repeatedly lure us to act against our longer-term interests. We’re often unaware of it, leading us to repeat decisions that are bad for us.

What did I learn?

George Lowenstein, a leading BE academic, found that moods, emotions and drives like hunger and sexual desire can sway decision-making and “cause people to behave contrary to their own long-term self-interest, often with full awareness that they are doing so.” (Loewenstein in Camerer et al (eds) 2004). Simply put, if you are hungry enough, you eat the pie even though you know it’s bad for you.

Unfortunately, unlike Ulysses, we suffer from what Lowenstein has coined hot/cold empathy gaps, meaning we are typically unaware of the degree to which emotion affects our decisions. This leads to a human tendency to consistently and mistakenly believe that we will be able to resist the siren calls when we hear them.

The research suggests that not only do we underestimate the degree to which our emotions and drives will impact our behaviour in the heat of the moment, we also fail to realise the extent to which they impacted it after the event. This limits our ability to learn from past mistakes, makes it harder to exercise self-control, and makes it less likely that we will plan alternative behaviour-management strategies (such as not buying the pie, or giving half of the pie away to someone else). Unlike Ulysses, we rarely know ourselves well enough to chain ourselves to the mast before the Sirens call.

How is this relevant for coaching?

Many clients are looking for ways to implement in a “hot” state decisions that they made while cold. For example, someone who promises themselves today that tomorrow they’ll complete a boring task like a tax return or making a call that is out of their comfort zone. Today, they believe that. Tomorrow, facing the boring or nerve-wracking reality, they give up.

A coach can help here by turning previous events like this into “tests”, asking a client to study past failures to consider the effect of the “hot” state, for example – or to try a one off experiment in resisting temptation, and reflect on whether it worked. If the client successfully exercises their intention of self-control, and completes the task, then great. If not, coach and client can explore and perhaps experiment with different strategies, such as reframing the task, making external commitments to complete by a certain time, or ‘chaining themselves’ to a desk in a shared office until they have finished, or other ideas the client themselves may have.
SELF-CONTROL: THE ‘SHOULD’ SELF AND THE ‘WANT’ SELF

Overview: Self-control can be seen as a disagreement between the ‘should’ self (“I should diet”) and the ‘want’ self (“I want the pie!”). The BE literature offers three approaches to this: the economists: using one self to set plans to control the other; decision-analysis: discussing and agreeing between selves who is right; negotiation framework: rationally negotiating with the ‘want’ self.

My Learning: I have encountered each of these approaches in my work, although not in as structured or scientific a framework. Finding the same approaches in BE affirms their value and offers a wider choice of language with which to share them with a client.

Application Example: Offering the different strategies as a suggestion to a client who has tried one but found it didn’t work; describing these strategies in the above language for a client who responds to or prefers this frame.

What’s this?
I came across three models of self-control in the behavioural decision research literature, an area closely linked to BE. Each casts the issue of self-control as a disagreement between two selves, the “should” self and the “want” self. So a decision about eating a fattening pie is a conflict between the self who believes “I should eat healthily” and the self who wants to enjoy the pie.
What did I learn?

The three different models I found were, as set out by Bazerman and Moore (2008):

**Economist**: The “should” self is rational and must triumph. It should develop and implement in advance schemes to corral, co-opt or control the “want” self.

**Decision theory**: Treat the two selves more equally, but acknowledge that both cannot be right. Question each self to find out which is wrong, continuing until reconciliation occurs. This is similar to an NLP exercise known as ‘parts integration’, where the coach asks the client to hold out their hands and imagine two conflicting ‘parts’ of themselves to come out, one to each hand, and then discuss their positive intentions for that person until they reach a point of agreement.

**Negotiation**: You can’t assume that the two parts of the self can negotiate a settlement, given their mutual dependence. So develop a rational negotiation strategy (vs a control strategy) for dealing with the ‘want’ self.

How is this relevant for coaching?

Take the example of a client who wants to fit exercise into their work schedule. They know they ‘should’ do more exercise, but when gym time comes, the ‘want’ self may have a different view.

The **economist** approach would seek to set things up in advance to make going to the gym possible for the ‘want’ self: a kit bag ready packed by the door, or signing up for six classes paid in advance. A coach might ask: ‘What would make going to the gym effortless for you?’

**Decision theory** would encourage a client to resolve for themselves which self’s preferences they are most committed to – fitness or home early after work? A coach might ask: “You keep saying you want to exercise more, but you are not taking any action – what is going on here?”

**Negotiation** would seek to balance enjoyment with fitness. A coach might ask: ‘What would the compromise between fitness and the opportunity cost for going to the gym be for you?’

A coach may well find that one or more of these approaches has come up naturally as an option in a coaching conversation. The three different options offer a systematic way of searching for different approaches if one doesn’t work. One also offers a more scientific frame for the NLP ‘parts integration’ exercise. Many clients may find this type of exercise beyond their comfort zone, but not blink at the suggestion to view their challenge from a decision theory perspective. If the approach is essentially the same, why not use the frame most appropriate for that client?
WILLPOWER AS MUSCLE?

Overview: Some emerging research builds up a picture of human willpower as like a muscle, in that it: fatigues after use; can be built up with repeated exercise over time; and relies on glucose energy supplies to work effectively.

My Learning: This would suggest that the action plans I co-create with my clients would have most chance of success if they start with things that will take a small amount of willpower, and build up gradually over time.

Application Example: Too early – keeping an eye on the emerging research.

What’s this?

Some emerging research is suggesting that willpower is a finite resource like muscle power: it declines with fatigue and can be built up with repeated exercise. It may even have a physical basis like glucose energy supplies.

What did I learn?

Some studies suggest that people who exert willpower in one activity seem to behave as though we have less willpower available for other activities (Ozdenoren et al 2005). Others even offer evidence of a biological link suggesting that acts of self-control reduce blood glucose levels, and that lower levels of blood glucose after a self-control task accurately predict poor performance on subsequent self-control tasks (Gailliot et al 2007). Ozdenoren et al (ibid) also suggest that although we may have limited willpower in the short-term, it is something that can be developed and strengthened over time.
However, others suggest willpower is more complicated. Burger et al (2010) for example find that “a willpower-depleting task reduces initial effort but increases overall task-completion rates.” Other research (Clarkson et al 2010) has found that perception matters: individuals who perceive themselves as less (rather than more) depleted in willpower were more successful at regulating themselves – whether or not their perception reflected the reality.

**How is this relevant for coaching?**

If it is true that human willpower is like a muscle (fatiguing after use, building up with repeated exercise over time and relying on glucose energy to perform) then this has implications for the action plans coaches co-create with clients. For example, it suggests that success is most likely if action plans start with things that will take a small amount of willpower, and build up gradually over time.

However, the research is at an early stage and there is not yet a strong consensus on its findings. Some caution is probably still required when seeking to apply this work to coaching practice, but this is an interesting space to watch.
## REAL LIFE DR SPOCKS

| Overview: | If he had really existed, Star Trek’s Dr Spock would have been very indecisive. Damasio worked with patients who had suffered damage to a particular area of their brain associated with our ability to experience emotion. He found that these patients, while appearing rational and capable on the surface, were unable to make simple decisions, such as which day to book their appointment. He postulated that, for the average human, emotions act as markers of significance for situations or certain outcomes of possible actions. Without access to the meaning that emotions give us, we lose our ability to decide between options. |
| My Learning: | I feel much more comfortable when facilitating conversations or exercises that explicitly deal with or incorporate feelings or emotions, and have more scientific language to draw on to support this. |
| Application Example: | Drawing more on exercises using emotions; passing on this reading to clients if relevant. |

### What's this?

The idea of an emotionless, ultra-rational person is a myth: emotions are not an obstacle to decision-making. They are a vital part of decision-making. People without emotion struggle to make decisions. In reality, a human version of Star Trek’s Dr Spock would have been very indecisive.

### What did I learn?

Damasio’s work seems to have been a key influence on the acceptance of emotions in the land of ‘rational man’, as well as many neighbouring fields, and I found him referenced in the literature many times. Damasio (2006) advanced the somatic marker hypothesis, based on the study of...
patients who had suffered damage to the area of the brain associated with the ability to feel emotion. He found that these patients, while appearing entirely rational and capable on the surface, were unable to make even the simplest of decisions, such as which day to return for their next appointment. He postulated that, for the typical human without damage to this brain area, emotions act as markers of significance. These markers provide a feeling (hence ‘somatic’) to go with ‘the facts’, which accords them a particular significance. Without these markers, the brain-damaged patients were left with only information and no means of according significance to one option over the other – and were therefore unable to come to a useful or timely conclusion. In essence, unless we know how we feel about different outcomes – or we can imagine how those outcomes will make us feel – we cannot chose between them.

This means that we’re wrong to view “emotional” and “rational” perspectives as discrete and potentially incompatible. They are merely two parts of the same whole. This means that we don’t choose between seeing the world through rose-tinted emotional spectacles and super-clear rational ones. Instead, the two perspectives are the two sides of a pair of binoculars: each can be used alone, but only using them together can give the whole picture and a proper sense of depth.

**How is this relevant for coaching?**

One useful lesson coaches can take here is about communication. Damasio’s work gives us a new way to explain the importance of emotions, something that is especially valuable with those clients who are more scientifically and less soft skills minded.

It also helps to reinforce the importance of emotions. Anyone working in change management, coaching or facilitation, will have come across the view that focusing on the role of emotions is indulging in the ‘fluffy stuff’, silly and irrelevant to the modern, rational world. That view can leave clients and coaches doubting the value of coaching work that focuses on emotions. BE’s findings on the importance of emotion should leave coaches more comfortable with this area, and more willing to expand their range into the emotional domain.
Conclusions and Key Insights

The research I came across in my investigation of BE stimulated my thinking about my own coaching practice and has prompted the following thoughts and reflections:

A Different Language or Framework

Damasio’s research into emotions and the different frameworks for self-control offer a more scientific language and framework to describe insights into human behaviour. This is useful for supporting and communicating with coaching clients who prefer to understand the world in this way.

Offering A More Balanced View

Looking at coaching practice through a different lens can help strike a balance between the intuitive and the rational (System 1 and System 2); and the emotional and logical (Damasio’s work). This gives coaches a wider range of tools and approaches to support their clients.

Highlighting Blindspots

This is particularly important for coaches, because part of our role is to help clients’ surface and challenge assumptions that are holding them back. If these assumptions are invisible to the coach, they can’t do that. The research into cognitive biases shed light onto some genuine and common blindspots for both coach and client.

Points of Agreement

BE offers ideas and insights which chime with some of those that will be familiar to many coaches. For example, some of the approaches to self-control and the importance of emotions in decision making. Identifying such points of agreement between the two reinforces the value and effectiveness of some coaching techniques.

Alongside these positives, I have also identified some potential downsides of drawing on the type of insights that BE provides, which I need to be wary of as I apply them in my practice. In particular:

• The danger that in describing something about human behaviour as a given you are more likely to make it happen²
• The importance of remembering that, while compelling, quantitative studies of human behaviour don’t mean that everyone will always change similar behaviour in all contexts

Further issues that coaches might want to consider for themselves if choosing to draw on research from BE in their work include:

• The unbalanced focus of the research on WEIRD subjects (ie those from Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic countries)³
• The relatively large time investment required to investigate and translate research in an unfamiliar field into insights that can be used in practice
• The difficulty of and effort involved in changing inbuilt biases and behaviour, even with the tools for awareness BE offers (Kahneman 2011)

² http://www.bps.org.uk/news/debunking-free-will-affects-brain access date 28/05/2011
³ Youn, Jamie http://projects.rsablogs.org.uk/author/jamie-young/ access date February 16th 2011 How WEIRD are you?
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Gallwey, Timothy (2010) *The Inner Game of Tennis* UK, Random House

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