

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - JENN BEATTY

(Katie Elliott & Jenn Beatty)

On today's show my guest is Jennifer Beatty, a research coordinator at Wharton People Analytics, a research centre at The Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. Jenn is part of a team investigating human behaviour at work, exploring topics such as collaboration, culture and sustainable behaviour change.

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Jenn Beatty, thank you so much for joining me today.

Thank you so much. It's my pleasure.

We've had a little chat before and the thing that struck me when we spoke was your enthusiasm and the passion for what it is that you do. So could you tell us a bit about what it is that you love to do?

So from being a little girl, I remember asking my mom about different challenges that I would face or my friends would face or people in our family would face, and I would try and brainstorm ways to help. And I recognise that this was slowly like a budding passion of mine. But as you can imagine at age 10 it's kind of hard to know how to help. So as I grew older, I began to study different things. In college, I was a double major in psychology and theatre. Then I became a *Teach for America* teacher. I just pursued a MAPP degree at the University of Pennsylvania in Positive Psychology. And now I work in research. And so all of these things have kind of led to me being able to clarify the best ways that I'm equipped to help people. And I've recognised that on one hand I've experienced a great amount of privilege. And on another hand I've also experienced my fair share of oppression. So I grew up as a black girl in LA and I went to school in a very rich part of town on a full scholarship. And so from a very young age, I've always felt kind of like an outsider who's been granted this incredible access. So based on that framework, I kind of have this perspective that I wouldn't normally have. And so the way I see it is I've noticed a lot of people dealing with mental oppression, whether it's from within themselves or from this outside entity. And I believe that I'm here to kind of help look at iceberg beliefs that may be supporting these systems of oppression and help people to really combat the oppression that they're either harbouring in their own lives or that they may be accepting from someone else and helping to break some of those barriers so that people can experience not only physical freedom, but mental freedom as well.

Wow. There's so much that I'd like to unpack in that. So one of the things I'd like to ask you is what's your definition of an 'iceberg belief'? I've not come across that phrase before. So what do you mean by it?

It's a great question. So I actually first came across this term when I was studying positive psychology. So if we think about an iceberg, right? You can see a bit of the iceberg on top but below is this huge amount of ice and when you bump into it, you may not even realise how deep it goes because the weight is on the bottom. And an iceberg belief basically refers to, you know, on top we may have different behaviours that people see or different actions that we do, different words that we say, but they're kind of supported by this depth of belief that can be unpacked so that you can really understand your motivation behind doing certain things. So for example, I may be, I don't know, standoffish to someone that is unfamiliar to me. And on the surface you may think like, "Oh, she's unapproachable", but it could be supported by this iceberg belief of, "I can't trust strangers" or, "Every time I get to know someone, I'm disappointed - so let me keep them at a distance so that I don't get hurt". All of those are kind of examples of what's underneath the surface that is influencing the behaviour. But you can't really address the behaviour until you get to what's going on underneath.

I get you. That's really helpful. So what I'm noticing, you mentioned mental oppression. I've been doing a lot of work trying to understand some of the beliefs that I have been carrying within myself and what I noticed with the kind of oppressive beliefs that we have within our own minds that they can be really, really hard to spot...

Yeah.

...really difficult to identify. So they're so much part of the operating system that we don't even know that they're running in the background. Have you, have you learned anything about how to notice what's underneath the surface of the water? The part of the iceberg that we can't actually see?

There are many ways to approach it. One of the approaches that actually is resonating the most with me right now, I actually derive it from my education background. So one of the amazing, incredible educators that I came across, his name is Paolo Freire, and he wrote this book called *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. And one of the things that he presents is: you know you are being oppressed when you believe that you have everything to learn in a situation and nothing to teach. He said, the indicator that you're really in like a nice symbiotic relationship is when you believe that you have just as much to learn as you have to teach, like a exchange of equals. So say that I made a mistake, I missed a friend's birthday or I said

something that I didn't mean, and instead of approaching my friend and having an honest conversation about what went wrong, I kind of all into a pattern of saying, "I'm not good. I'm a horrible person. This kind of thing always happens. I'm going to end up alone and lonely because no one can trust me because I let people down". I am not allowing myself to be a teacher. And so in that situation I might ask myself, what about this situation can I learn from? And what about the situation can I teach myself? So if I miss a friend's birthday, one great easy lesson is that I'm not perfect. I make mistakes. And then what can I teach myself? I can teach myself that I can put reminders in to help support my success along the way. I can become responsive in a way where even though I made a mistake, it doesn't have to happen again. And even if it happens again, it's not an indicator of my worth or my value. It's a matter of missing the mark. And I love something that Maya Angelou says. I feel like she has inspired me in so many ways. Basically, I'm paraphrasing, but she says, don't hold yourself accountable today for the lessons that you didn't learn until today. So if you didn't know something, you forgive yourself every time because when you know better, you do better. And so that's one of the ways you can actively catch yourself by asking yourself, what am I learning in this moment and what am I teaching myself? What am I reinforcing?

Hmm. Really interesting. So that very, very self-punishing reaction...

Yeah

...is a good indicator that there's some sort of self-limiting or self-oppressing belief running in the background, even if we haven't quite spotted it yet. There's probably something going on back there that's not really serving us very well.

Yeah. And I always like to call myself a recovering perfectionist because from the moment I knew that I could get like a high mark and people could praise that that was all I wanted. And so I would beat myself up for it. But if we think about how people are physically oppressed, they're often beaten and there's often violence. And so if we can identify these violent mental patterns that we inflict upon ourselves - often, right, people aren't even doing that to us. We're doing it to ourselves. It's a key indicator that I'm oppressing or suppressing something in me that I need to learn from, adapt, be aware of, have it come to surface, because beating it down, you can't see it, right? You're just kind of hiding from it. But it's only once it surfaces, then you can actually deal with what it is.

Mmm. So we can start to notice those patterns and we can start to challenge our own thinking, our own patterns of belief?

Absolutely.

But what about when it feels as if there's some kind of oppressive belief that's affecting us from the outside? Is that the case? I mean, is it that we take what comes from outside and we internalise it somehow? What have you learned about that?

Yeah, it's a great question and I think that, absolutely, we are affected from the outside and the messages that we receive from the media or from our parents or from our friends or from these institutions that we hold on to. And sometimes they don't come up until years later. Um, and so I'll give an example because I think there's this great back-and-forth exchange that happens that sometimes we're unaware of. So I mentioned that I was a theatre major and one of my early experiences with theatre as a teenager, I had just gotten accepted into this incredible company and I was so excited to begin working with them. I thought it was this huge accomplishment that I had achieved and I was just so excited to get started. And I remember one of the first rehearsals, my director coming up to me and saying, "You know, Jenn, you have a really unique style, but I think it's really important that you train more traditionally". And at first I didn't quite understand what she was saying and you know, after some conversation she said to me, "You know, Jenn, you have to learn the rules before you can break them". I internalised that message so deeply that I didn't even recognise how I was misapplying it to all sorts of areas in my life is. So I started restricting my natural expressions. I started not participating in other areas where I felt I had a unique contribution because I told myself, "I don't know all the rules yet. I don't know all the rules yet". And so I would find myself not speaking about what I was learning because I hadn't mastered all the rules, or not sharing my experiences because I hadn't mastered all the rules. And in fact, it was only probably a year ago when I was reminded of this. So now it's been almost a decade, right? Because eventually I would love to get my PhD in psychology and I was talking to a mentor and I said, "You know, we'll all be able to do that once I'm a psychologist". And she said, "Well, where is that coming from?" And it took me a while to unearth it, but I finally went back to this message that I was told and she said, "Well, I have a question for you that you probably weren't able to ask yourself then, but how do you know when you've learned all the rules?"

Yes!

You know, like is it when you accomplish something big enough to say like, "Oh yeah, I checked that box". And how do you know that the rules that you're learning aren't limiting your creativity? How do you know that the rules are appropriate? Who created these rules, right? What systems are telling you what rules you need to learn, right? Rules, if taken too literally, can box us in to places that we were really

meant to break others out of. And so I took this small yet important belief and then I began to track how that had influenced the rest of my life. And I noticed that, and this is something Friere argues too, if you're not aware of the oppression in your own life, what ends up happening is that when you're in a position of power, you actually end up oppressing others because that's how you know to engage with power. And so I started thinking about myself as a middle school English teacher in Teach for America. And I would say to students, "When you're writing an essay, you have to know the grammar rules. You cannot break them. Like if you become a world renowned author, then you can break them". And I realised I was spouting the same oppressive message without recontextualizing when it's important to be aware of rules, but also knowing that you have just as much to offer in this situation as I have to teach. Right? Let's get into a more symbiotic relationship so that we can both learn from each other. And so I think in that case, the message of oppression came from an external force. I then internalised it and applied it and misapplied it really to situations where it had no business living. Because I just wanted to impress the people in power and I wanted to be good enough. And I think when you're always striving towards that unseen mark, you're going to miss it every time because that's not what achievement is.

There's a lot in there. So, something I'd love to know your thoughts on... When there is explicit oppressive behaviour or speech coming from outside of us, of whatever kind, what do you think is the best way of responding to that?

Ah, that's such a great question. I think questions are our best friends because I think often what ends up happening is we make assumptions about a situation, about a person and about what we think is going on when in actuality it takes quite a bit of courage to just ask: "The story I'm telling myself right now about what you're saying to me (like taking the example I used earlier) is that what I'm bringing to the table is not good enough. Is that what you're trying to tell me?" Right, so you're reflecting what you're hearing and what you're internalising and you may not be able to do it in the moment. You may come back a week or two later once you recognise what's going on. But you bring them back and you say, is that your intention? And they may say, yes, that is my intention. But I think more often than not, they'll say, "No, I did not intend for you to receive that message". But I think these conversations require so much courage because they sit in what Brené Brown calls that 'place of vulnerability', right? It's right in the centre of you having to admit what you're hearing and what you're internalising and then asking, "Is that what you really mean? Because that's what I'm hearing". And it sounds idyllic because it requires a great amount of self-awareness as well as the courage to speak up. And I think often, if we look at mindsets of those who are oppressed, they silence themselves because they don't want to feel as if they're making too much noise or making too much of a fuss. And so I think if you're in a position of power, it's very

important to ask people after you share something, ask them to repeat what they heard. So if I were sharing this message to a student and say, "You know, you have to know the rules before you break them, what does that mean to you when I say that?" And have the student or the person who's in a position of perceived lesser power be able to echo back to you so you can hear and course-correct what you meant with what they're hearing and make it a safe space for people to speak and you don't get into offence and they don't get into offence, but just have the conversation. I think a lot of times we have one way conversations where we talk at people, we assume they get it and then we go about our day. And I don't think it's any one person's responsibility. I think it's a shared collective responsibility that if you're in a position of power, you have to be mindful of what you're saying. And I think we're all in positions of power in different ways in our lives. And I think if you're receiving messages that you are internalising, it's important for you to clarify what the intent of the message was before you internalise it. If there's some feedback in there, I'm going to take the feedback because I'm interested in growing, but I don't have to take on your perception of who I am as a human being or your perception of my value and of my worth. Right? Viola Davis says this great thing, she's like, "That's not my burden to carry". And the ability to navigate through that comes with a lot of deep soul work where you know who you are, you're connected to your purpose, you know why you're here and you're interested in growing and it helps you kind of separate as the Bible says, the wheat from the chaff, right? You know, what's good and what can be left behind.

Mmm. I'm just reflecting that we also do that thing within our own minds, don't we? We can give us some really useful advice, but it can be couched in language that's really dismissive. So learning to tell the difference between the good stuff and the stuff that we can safely let go of, well, I think it's a life's work, isn't it?

Oh absolutely.

But you say that through purpose, through getting a strong sense of what our purpose is... What do you mean when you say purpose?

Yes. So I love to reference Amy Wrzesniewski's work. She talks about the difference between jobs, careers and callings. And she says, you know, a job is something that you basically do to pay the bills. A career is something that you can find meaning in, but it's like more of a longer term thing. But a calling is dedicating yourself to something larger than yourself and really feeling as if you're doing socially useful work that's going to make a difference in the world. And it's not to say, like if you're in a career, you need to go find your calling, it's not about that, but it's about looking at the work you're doing and asking yourself, "Is this a job, a career or a calling for me?" And almost identifying it that way. And I think sometimes people's

callings are their work, like their jobs that they go to every day. I think sometimes people's callings are their families or what people might categorise as a hobby. Sometimes it aligns where your calling is what you're paid to do, and sometimes it's not. What is so incredible about feeling called to do something is it really stems out of interest. So some of the work of Angela Duckworth actually comes to mind and she talks about how to cultivate your interests when she's talking about grit. And so she defines grit as "passion plus perseverance for a longterm goal". People often think of grit as just the perseverance part, right - just the striving. But she actually emphasises what it means to be passionate about something. And if you listen to people talk about passion, they often talk about it as if it's something to be discovered, right? Like, and I woke up one day and I had my passion, but she actually argues, and it's backed by a lot of empirical evidence that passions aren't as much discovered as they are developed. And when you look at your passion as something to be developed, it's almost like you have to spend time trying out different things and then you find the thing that you keep coming back to and you can't stop thinking about and you're always asking questions about and you're always engaged in. And for me, I didn't come to this place where I was deeply interested in these systems of oppression really until earlier this year. But if I look back at my life, it's been an interest of mine for as long as I can remember. But I didn't put the pieces together until I spent more time with it.

I'm just wondering what 10 year old Jenn would think about that.

Oh my goodness. 10 year old Jenn would be in awe because I'm in awe right now that this path is the leading to something that makes sense. Because in the beginning there I was like, I don't see how this is all going to weave together. And as I talked to a lot of my friends too, particularly in their early twenties, it doesn't make sense, right? You're kind of taking jobs here and doing things on the side and trying to figure out what's next. What should I do? How do I make money? How do I connect with people? How do I help people? And it doesn't feel like it's coming together in a cohesive way. And so I think awe is the feeling because it's like, "Wow, it wasn't random!" Like everything happened for this amazing reason. If even this is it, like even just where I am now, that feels like it, it's enough. And I think that's how you know you're in your calling when you're not striving to become enough. But when you know that the work you're doing right now is more than enough because you're more than enough just by answering the call.

For us recovering perfectionists, isn't it the loveliest place to get to when you realise that? And what you're saying about it all kind of coming together and making sense. I think it's really hard for us to see it when we're looking down the road towards it.

Yeah.

In my experience, it's only when you look back you can go, "Oh yeah!" So I'm just thinking that 10 year old Jenn who liked to help people...

Yeah.

... is gradually developing in all kinds of different ways, still along that same path, that she could never have imagined back then.

Exactly.

Before we have to finish - do you have a 'Little Challenge' for us?

Yes. So this is a challenge that can help not only us, but those around us. I would love for us all - and I like to participate on the challenges too - to identify an area in your life where you have power. And this can be either interpersonal power, so power that you have maybe with someone else or intrapersonal power meaning power that you have within yourself. The easiest one that I think of is the power of our time, right? How we spend it, what we choose to spend it on. And ask yourself the following three questions on a weekly basis. The first is, "What am I actively learning?" The second, "What am I actively teaching?" And the third, "Is there anything that I need to shift, and if so, what is one step that I can take?" So I love to use the example of time for the interpersonal power. So time is something that I do have power over in my life. So my first question would be, what am I actively learning about time? About its impact, its usage, its distribution. What am I learning? And then what am I teaching myself about time? Am I teaching myself that there's never enough of it? Am I teaching myself that I'm in power of the time? Am I teaching myself that time is the most precious unrenewable resource? What am I teaching myself actively? And then is there anything that I need to shift about how I use my time? And if so, what is one step that I can take? So that's my challenge, to identify one area in your life. It can either be within yourself or between you and another person. Ask yourself, "What am I learning? What am I teaching? What might I want to shift this week?"

What a great challenge. Thank you, Jenn. If people would like to find out more about what you're doing are there places that they can find you online?

Yes, they can. So the best place to connect with me is LinkedIn and if you would like to connect with me on a more social level, I'm also most frequently on Instagram or Twitter, and my is the same in both places- it's @jennbeatty.

That's wonderful, Jenn. Thank you. Thank you for your time and for sharing so many interesting thoughts and so much of yourself. Thank you.

Oh, Katie, it's my pleasure. Thank you so much for having me on.