

3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript
Lynn Thoman
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Ep. 115: The Person You Mean To Be and A More Just Future with Social Scientist Dolly Chugh

INTRO male voice: Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

Lynn Thoman: Hi everyone, it's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another episode. Today I'm excited to be with Dolly Chugh. She's an award-winning social scientist, a professor at NYU, and the author of several New York Times best-selling books, including "A More Just Future" and "The Person You Mean to Be" about how good people fight bias. I'm excited to find out why Dolly believes we need to stop thinking about ourselves as unbiased and good people in order to become the people we mean to be. Dolly's journey is fascinating. The more aware she became, the less she liked what she saw. Welcome, Dolly, and thanks so much for our conversation today.

Dolly Chugh: Thank you so much Lynn. It's very good to be with you.

LT: It is a pleasure to be with you. Dolly, can you tell us about some of your studies and examples on bias and how people who thought themselves unbiased were actually biased? For example, I loved your study. I found it so unexpected that men with stay-at-home wives undergo a negative change in their attitudes toward women in the workplace, in their workplaces.

DC: Yes, that was co-authored work with Sreedhari Desai and Art Brief, and it came from a place of, we were wondering with genuine curiosity and empathy for the dilemma a husband in a heterosexual marriage might have, where at work, he's hearing DEI and egalitarian and women and men, same job, same potential. And then he goes home, and there's a very different division of labor that he and his partner have agreed to, where he's the breadwinner and she's the stay-at-home, let's say parent and caregiver at home and home maker. And it occurred to us that this is a big mental shift that people are making or being asked to make, and we wondered, are they? Are they actually making that shift? Is that happening, and if not, how can we understand that better? So, we looked at longitudinal data that had been collected in a big archival data set, and we were able to look at, over the course of many years, how men who participated in a panel of responding to similar survey questions, time after time, how they responded before they were married and after they were married and what their attitudes were towards women in the workplace. And what we found in that, and we paired that with some other experiments to control for some of the stuff you can't control for an archival data.

DC: What we found was that before men were married, they were more likely to show egalitarian views towards women in the workplace, but after they married, if they had a, what we call traditional, if you will, division of labor in their homes, that their attitudes towards women in the workplace seemed to change. And so it didn't seem like they just self-selected into a marriage that suited their outlook, it seems like there was something about the marriage that led to that change.

LT: Dolly, tell us about your journey from taking your then young children on a Midwestern road trip, inspired by the "Little House on the Prairie" book series to now.

DC: Yes. I, like millions of others, when I was a kid, I loved reading the "Little House on the Prairie" books and watching the TV show, and when my children were born, I was very excited to read the book series to them, spent a whole year doing it Lynn, every night, eight books, 200-some pages each. Every night we read together. They were maybe six and seven years old at the time, so much so that this family, the Ingalls family... And as background for those who might not be familiar, the series is written by Laura Ingalls Wilder, who writes about her childhood and her family in the 1800s, as her family... As the colonizing of land took place in the United States, they were able to get land, build a home, start a family. And so, she tells this memoir of her family and these characters became part of our family. We talked about them all the time, they showed up in my kids drawing, they would make drawings of our family and there would be Laura Ingalls in our family. And so my husband and I are like, What if we actually went to the physical places where these stories took place, in Minnesota and South Dakota, and we lived on the East Coast, so this would be places that we hadn't been ourselves and we hadn't taken our children, and it was this most amazing trip? The kids wore prairie dresses, like they asked to wear Prairie dresses the whole week, it was like the cutest thing ever.

DC: And I've got to tell you, we were smug in our parenting, congratulations, and back padding of educational, emphasizing good values and [chuckle] affordable... What a vacation. Somewhere in the back of my mind, especially when we were physically there, I started feeling like, "But wait, wasn't... Hold on, this land was Native American land. How did it become the Ingalls land again?" Some questions started poking in my head, and I'm not proud of this, but I didn't know what do with that, and I just pushed to the side. And as the years have gone on, 10 years since then, I thought back to that moment a lot. Those decisions I made and the discomfort I had with what was coming up with me emotionally, and I started looking for a way to understand how to do that differently.

DC: How could I have given my kids a fuller version of American history that would have enabled them to see not just the Ingalls' perspective, but the perspective of the indigenous people who were on those lands who lost their homes, whose families were separated, who lost their lives. And I started looking around for, is there a book out there, or is there somebody who's already figured this out, kind of, hand me the tools. I couldn't find anything accessible. What I could find, however, in our academic journals were lots of tools that are evidence-based and so that led to me basically writing the book I felt I needed to read called "A More Just Future," which offers psychological tools for how to reckon with white-washed history, where we have to unlearn a narrative or broaden narrative, and deal with the emotions that come up with that. And I'll just close this out by saying, to be very clear, I am not a historian, I'm not even a history buff, really. I am a psychologist, and this domain of thinking about emotions and what's the relationship we have with our ancestors and our past, feels to me very psychological, and so that's where this intersection of psychology and history came up for me.

LT: Why is the person that we all want to be, the kind of people we all aspire to be, better than we actually are?

DC: Well, you're quoting the title of my first book, "The Person I Need to Be."

LT: I am.

DC: And that title came from exactly the gap you're describing that most of us, studies will show, like to see ourselves as moral and competent and deserving. We may not feel that way consciously in every moment but unconsciously, we have all sorts of forces that motivate us to see the world through that lens. And on top of it all, we have this incredibly agile human mind that can do a lot of things on autopilot without us consciously directing it. That combination of our motivation to see ourselves in a positive light and a lot of things happening on auto-pilot that we're not even really aware we're doing, sets us for a really tough position where we see ourselves, for example, in the domain and the kind of work I do as being very ethical and moral, and yet we may unconsciously be falling short of some of those ideals. An example of that that's gotten a lot of conversation in recent years and a lot of research in recent decades, is unconscious bias, where our unconscious biases about other groups of people may not be different than our conscious beliefs about those people.

LT: As you gave the example of the husband with a working wife or a non-working wife.

DC: Exactly, exactly.

LT: Can you explain... And again, I'm paraphrasing you Dolly, "The person I mean to be stands up for equality and equity and diversity and inclusion. Sometimes I do, and sometimes I don't?"

DC: Yeah. My research intellectually comes from places that are personal for me, where I'm trying to do better in my own life, and I'm struggling. A student will say something in class that's racist. I don't know if they meant it or not, but it is. And I can see in the faces of my students their horror and their disappointment and they're hurt, and I don't know what to say in that moment. I don't know how to handle it in that moment. Or I say something that is problematic or I confuse two black male students for each other when they look nothing alike at all, these moments are examples where sometimes I just don't... I don't get it right. And that reality, I think, is if we put ourselves in, what I call this good person fixed mindset, this is the research from Carol Dweck, psychologist at Stanford and others, where either we are or not, something where we're not a work in progress, we're just static as a good person then those instances, those missteps that I just described in myself will put me in a, "Well, wait, I have to defend, remember, I like to see myself as a good person. I have to defend that identity as opposed to learn from that moment."

DC: So when I were with those words, what I was trying to highlight and make visible to my readers is that if we are striving for perfection, this is a futile journey. What we want to do is strive for getting better all the time, sometimes we will get it right and sometimes we won't. The question is, what do we do the next time?

LT: Tell us about headwinds and tailwinds.

DC: This is a metaphor, Debby Irving, a writer, has offered, that has helped me [chuckle] so much. I was writing my first book and what I do in the, both of my books is curate science with stories where I interview real people in real situations. And I was doing those interviews for the first book, and a few of the people I interviewed would bring up the word systemic. I'd write it down but I was like, "I don't know. I study... I'm a social psychologist studying individuals and sort of groups and organizations, I'm not sure why they keep bringing up systems," but I wrote it down. And I was

going over the transcripts and noticing this word coming up again and again, I was like, "I guess I should try to understand why this keeps coming up. I know what the dictionary definition is, but why is it connecting... Why are they seeing my questions about ways in which you've been affected by bias or you hold bias, why are they connecting that to a system?" So I did a deep dive for a day or two into the topic, and I came out like, "Oh my goodness, I can't believe I have signed a book contract with HarperCollins to write an entire book on bias."

DC: And in my 60-page book proposal, the word systemic does not show up, like I did a word search, it wasn't there. Because they're so connected. What I do as an individual is deeply connected to the systems in which I live, the systems of law, media, norms. These are all systems that will affect individuals and individuals will affect the systems. And so I ended up actually going back to my editor and renegotiating the table of contents to add a chapter in the book where I could use Debby Irving's work on headwinds and tailwinds to explain what felt very abstract to me, this word, systems. And basically it's as simple as, let's say, I'm going to go out for a run or a bike ride or a walk. And I head outside and I say, Well, I'm going to go to where the park ends, and then I'm going to U-turn and come back. And on my way to the end of the park, I'm like, I think this low carb thing is paying off, I'm doing pretty good here, making good time, personal best, and then I make the U-turn turn back and I find myself struggling.

DC: And if somebody was watching out their window and they see me struggle, they're not outside and they can't quite feel what I'm feeling. They might be like, "Well, she doesn't look that motivated. Maybe she comes from a community, doesn't really value effort," or some sort of explanation, whereas what I would know is that I was facing a headwind on the way back. The same wind that was my tailwind on the way out. And tailwinds aren't easy to feel. They just sort of propel us, I give myself the credit, personal best, but headwinds really un-feelable and they affect the person, but those watching the person may not realize what's happening, and that helped me understand what we mean when we talk about systems.

LT: It was eye-opening to me to read about the headwinds and tailwinds, which I was unfamiliar with before. You talk about how the tailwinds in people's life, hide the challenges affecting others. Can you tell us about that?

DC: Yeah. And there's an exercise I like to do sometimes with people, which is to ask them to think about the identities that they hold. And so if it were me, if I were being asked the same question, I might say, "Oh, I'm a professor, I'm a mother, I'm a writer, I'm Indian-American, the children of immigrants." I'd rattle off a few identities. Those are the ones that are top of mind this morning for me. And then someone might say, "Well, what are the identities that you don't think about that often, or that other people might name that you don't really name?" And if I really thought about it, I might say, "Well, I'm straight." I don't think about that very often. I don't think I really need to because I don't have to worry about whether my employer will treat me fairly for being straight or whether I would be in harm's way if someone saw me walking down the street holding hands with my partner. I don't have to hear jokes that are derogatory about my loved ones. I don't have to worry about the law and how it's going to treat me, and that identity that I think about less is a good clue of where I have tailwinds, and once I know where I have tailwinds, I know where someone else has headwinds. So this very quick, easy mental exercise can quickly help us figure out where systems are working for us versus against us.

LT: Many people have heard the term white privilege, which is actually only a very small, narrow

subset of privilege. What is ordinary privilege? Who has it, who doesn't?

DC: Thank you for articulating that. Privilege is a broader term than white privilege. Privilege at its heart is just meant to say, this is an area where you have tailwinds. And if you do the exercise that I just described and think about the different identities, what you find is that in some of our identities, we have headwinds and then in some of our identities we have tailwinds. And so that's certainly true for every person I've ever done this exercise with. And in some of our identities, we do hold privilege, and that might be for some people, white privilege. What I have been trying to do because it's become such a polarizing, emotionally charged issue, is help us think about privilege in a way that is actionable. And what I've been calling it is ordinary privilege. Rather than thinking a privilege is something that is bad or to be denied or shameful, what if we thought of it as an ordinary thing that everyone has some form of. It's also ordinary, because we don't think of it that often, those identities we think of less, the tailwind we don't feel, they're so ordinary. We don't really have to think about them. But we have this opportunity that the research says, when we are not the target of a bias, so for example, when we have a tailwind, not a headwind, and we speak up...

DC: So let's say someone tells a racist joke. If a black person speaks up and says, "Hey, that's not cool," versus a white person speaks up and says, "Hey, that's not cool," what research says is the black person will be taken less seriously in that moment than the white person. The white person will have more influence. Now, that's messed up in all sorts of ways, but it's sort of consistent with what we know about human behavior, and what it gives us is an opportunity to use our ordinary privilege to be able to effect change, to not feel helpless. So many people ask me, What can I do? That's the most common question. What we can do is use our ordinary privilege. When you see something that you feel isn't right, saying even a little bit as simple as, Hey, that's not cool, or... Can I ask you about that? Or, Tell me more about how you got to that conclusion. When you're not directly holding the identity that's affected, can be effective. To be very clear, this is not to speak over people who are directly affected, or instead of, it's simply to speak in partnership with them.

LT: Dolly, since as you said, each of us has a multi-faceted identity, it means that each of us has at least one ordinary privilege. Can you expand a bit on more examples of ordinary privileges?

DC: Sure. It can be anything from, if you're in an environment where there's gender disparities in pay in your organization, you might have ordinary privilege. If you're in a group that's paid more, which in many organizations is men, if you're in... And I'm using a gender binary there to describe that, if you're in an organization... I guess I'll focus on organizations. If you're in an organization where people, from a hiring perspective, there's a very narrow set of criteria of how people are viewed as qualified, coming from very specific schools, for example. Even though we know there's all sorts of variables that are outside of someone's potential and qualification that could determine whether they end up at, for example, an Ivy League school, or whether that feels like a place where they have a sense of belonging. So, that criteria may in fact be eliminating people, so ordinary privilege might be, if you come from a school like that, you got hired through that criteria, you might have an opportunity to say, I wonder if we're losing out in the war for talent by not looking more broadly. Any place where there's a disparity that you're thinking about is a place where you potentially hold ordinary privilege.

LT: An essential part of your argument is that people that have that ordinary privilege, that's part of that group, don't even recognize, see the group, it's only the people that don't have it, whether it's

race or education or pay or anything else.

DC: That's right, on average. Now, it's also true, there's work by psychologist John Jost and others that have looked at something called system justification theory, which is the idea that we look at how things are around us and we assume that it's justified the way it is, and what that can mean is that sometimes even those who on the short end of the stick will justify the system that they're in. The system justifying could mean that you could find some black people believing that there is no racism, even though the data is very clear about that, and some women believing that there is no sexism, even though the data is very clear on that. So, it's not as simple as what group you belong to, what identity you hold will immediately mean you can see things, there are some mental illusions, if you will, that are psychologically driven that can make it hard to see what the data show us, but absolutely, on average, that's what we would find.

LT: You talked about people speaking up, how else can people use their ordinary privilege for other people?

DC: Noticing is a big part of it. So, one of the things I have become really interested in is, what's invisible to us? The sort of classic example is your roommate or your spouse opens the fridge and is like, "Oh, I can't believe there's no eggs, there's no eggs." That's actually happened yesterday where I claim there were no eggs, [chuckle] and there's no eggs, and there's no eggs, and then your roommate comes over, your family member comes over and is like, "You mean, the eggs that are right in front of you in the fridge?" The thing we didn't notice that was right in front of us, that's an absolutely common feature of that mind to describe that unconscious mind that does a lot of work on auto pilot. It will miss a lot of things. So, one of the things we want to get better at and using our ordinary privilege is seeing things that we wouldn't ordinarily see. How do we do that? There's a few ways. One, look at data, like literally look at data, if you're thinking about hiring, look at the hiring data, look at the pay data, look at who is applying. Second, we can broaden the inputs that we're receiving, that can be as simple as whatever you like to consume media-wise, social media, TV, podcasts, video games, whatever it is, broaden the voices you're hearing.

DC: The identities of the creators, the identities of the actors or the characters, you will notice more things if you're hearing for more voices. And three, listen to people when they're telling you things. I love the, "wait rule," the W-A-I-T, Why Am I Talking rule that I learned from the books of Michael Bungay Stanier and the wait rule says, if someone's telling you something's not right, something's not working, something's not fair, the instinct is to defend it, to explain it, to say why it's an exception, to explain what they don't understand, the wait rule says, Stop and listen.

LT: Dolly, before I ask for the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today, is there anything else you'd like to mention that you haven't already talked about?

DC: One of the ideas that I've been lobbying for is that we let go of that idea of being a good person that we talked about earlier in favor of being a good-ish person. And what I mean by good-ish is to be clear is a higher standard than a good person, not a lower standard. When you're in a good-ish mindset... When I'm in a good-ish mindset, I have a growth mindset instead of a fixed mindset. The growth mindset is very familiar to most of us. Most of us are trying to be better at our jobs now than we used to be, we're trying to be better parents now than we used to be, we're always getting better at things, we have a hobby, I just took up pickleball, I'm trying to be better at pickleball now than I was last week. So in many domains of our life, we're always trying to get better, being good-ish,

means we apply that same mindset to what it means to be a good person. And we don't view it as something that I'm just born as or I learned as a kid and I'm done. We're always updating. So, I would offer that as an important nugget of letting go of being a good person so that we can be a good-ish person, become better.

LT: What are the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

DC: I would say the first one is that if we think we have nothing left to learn or no way left to grow, that is the thing we have to learn or grow, that's it. Any place where we feel like our opinion, our skills, our outlook is done, is a place where we need to revisit. That's number one. Number two, We are really poor forecasters of most things. In "A More Just Future," one of the things I try to offer is those emotions we're so worried about, the shame, the guilt, we're better at coping with those things than we think we are, and there's lots of research that says we're bad emotional forecasters, and so not letting our forecast stop us from doing that growth and learning that I talked about in the first takeaway. And my third takeaway would be that, I think we all as adults have figured out that life is complicated, people are complicated, is what I would also add to that as a psychologist. So, simple narratives, especially simple historical narratives, where it's like someone was a flawless hero, are almost always wrong, oversimplified fables that are misleading us in our understanding of human beings and of the past, and makes it difficult for us in the present to make change in an effective way.

LT: Dolly, thank you, this has been terrific. I really enjoyed both of your books. Thank you for those as well.

DC: Thank you and thank you for this wonderful podcast.

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