

# ONE MIND, MANY TRUTHS

PEOPLE OFTEN HOLD CONFLICTING IDEAS  
ABOUT THE SAME THING, AT THE SAME TIME.  
WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR MARKET RESEARCH?

June 2022

---

A podcast transcript with Ben Page & Aynsley Taylor

# IPSOS VIEWS

GAME CHANGERS



**Aynsley Taylor** Welcome to this *Ipsos Views* podcast! Today I am delighted to welcome back our Global CEO, Mr Ben Page, who will be helping us to explore the concept of cognitive polyphasia.

Hello again Ben. It is great to welcome you back to the *Ipsos Views* podcast. It is Easter Week - at least in the part of the world that follows the Western tradition. This is the first time that you and I have spoken since before Christmas, I think. I think it is safe to say that it has been a very eventful start to 2022, and one that has challenged many preconceptions about the way that the modern world works.

So, I think it is probably a good time for us to talk about cognitive polyphasia, which is a term I don't think I'd ever heard about until I heard you use it recently. I gather the term is relatively new: it was coined in 1961 by a gentleman called Serge Moscovici. I hope I have got the pronunciation right?

**Ben Page** The French sociologist and philosopher, of course, which is very important in a French company.

**Aynsley Taylor** Indeed. And in addition to being yet another inspirational Frenchman, he is also considered to be one of the founding fathers of the discipline we now know as social psychology. Our own internal definition of cognitive polyphasia - which you are the author of - describes it as *“the ability to accommodate conflicting ideas about the same thing at the same time, without experiencing cognitive dissonance”*.

With that in mind, why do you think understanding cognitive polyphasia is important to understanding the world around us, and to the business of market research specifically?

**Ben Page** I think that the key challenge is that people seem to hold these conflicting ideas about the same thing simultaneously. And that makes of course the data sometimes look strange. You know, people say that they are very worried about climate change - they think it is a clear and present danger and then you look at what they are doing or their behaviour, and you find out of course that they are planning to fly more as soon as the restrictions are lifted. And they are planning to carry on doing pretty much what they did before.

People seem to hold these conflicting ideas about the same thing simultaneously. ”

Or they are terribly worried about crime. And then you look at the data and it shows that actually in their country, crime has been falling. But they of course tend to think it is going up so there is a whole mixture of things going on here. But I think that things like the “say-do gap” which we talk about in a number of areas, people say one thing and do something else.

All of that means that understanding people in all their complexities is really important for us in our work. It should make us think more about looking at simply, you know... one dimensional

questions, and assuming they tell us something. It is only really by digging beyond that and being a bit challenging of ourselves that we can help our clients, whether they are in government or working for brands, to really understand people and how they might actually behave in response to an idea. This is just another symptom of the fact that people are complicated... and that keeps us in work! So, it is maybe not a bad thing.

**Aynsley Taylor** Your interest in this feels like part of a longer Ipsos tradition of highlighting the gaps between public understanding and actual reality. Examples being our work with *Perils of Perception* over the past few years, and the things that we have done to expose the various myths and realities around different generations.

**Ben Page** Absolutely. And I think our job is to point out inconsistencies in people's behaviour. You know most people want to pay as little tax as possible, but also have really, really good public services in many countries. And of course, those two things are not necessarily mutually compatible - but telling them that is slightly difficult. So then one needs to dig into the reasons about why they want to pay as little tax as possible but also expect world class public services. Understanding this is important in trying to understand what is really driving people's behaviour, people's beliefs etc. And it also challenges us in our work because some of these things that we are exposing as apparently conflicting ideas are simply the result of not digging enough or reflecting enough on the findings that we have actually got.

Another classic one is the country I know very well, Britain. Most people want immigration reduced. Most people tend to think that immigration is a major problem in the country and yet if you ask them is it a big problem where you live, they all say "no of course it is not a problem where I live". This tension between wanting to lose weight - which the majority of people do - and then of course what people actually do which is go and buy all sorts of sugary fatty foods that are not good for them. So how do they think those two things at the same time are going to work out? And of course, one way of explaining it is our friend cognitive polyphasia. At one moment they think "I must lose weight, but I must have that tasty snack as well".

**Aynsley Taylor** And as you said earlier cognitive polyphasia has a lot in common with the infamous "say-do gap". In fact, you might say it's probably synonymous with it. It is a phrase we use to describe situations where consumer behaviour doesn't reflect what people tell us in response to survey questions. What kind of tools do we have that can help to resolve those apparent contradictions?

**Ben Page** Well, I think the first is making sure that you are looking at all aspects of people's values. One issue is what political scientists would call salience. People will say that they are very worried about climate change, as we have shown in our poll for Earth Day where we look at the state of the planet every year. And when you ask people what the biggest problems in their lives are, or the things that most worry them,

and you offer them up some different choices including the safety of their children from child pornography, or just disrespectful or anti-social behaviour, and then things like money and their health... climate change, despite it being an existential threat potentially to life on the planet, is about number eight on the list of things that people say they are worried about.

Some of this is about the here and now. One of the things that we know is that people are not very good at spotting “Grey Rhinos”: big dangerous slow-moving things. We are much more attuned to Sabre-Tooth Tigers coming into our cave: we react very quickly to a very clear and present immediate danger. Look at how humanity managed to deal with COVID-19: it is amazing how the scientific community and countries all over the world reacted to that crisis. We haven’t got over it but life in many countries has more or less returned to normal. And we have got a vaccine that was made available in a few months in a way that normally took between five to seven years. But something that is sort of longer term, like climate change, like some aspects of pollution, or indeed like the obesity crisis, which are long-term creeping problems: we are distracted by the here and now... “Oh well never mind, let’s let somebody else deal with it” because the here and now always wins.

So, the tools I think we need are making sure we are asking about a whole load of aspects of a particular issue. We are weighing up how an issue of concern like climate change actually stacks up in someone’s normal everyday life.

And then finally we are using really good qualitative and ethnographic observational type techniques to dig below what people say and what they do when they are not the same.

People are not very good at spotting “Grey Rhinos”: big dangerous slow-moving things.”

**Aynsley Taylor** Let’s look at some more concrete recent examples of what might be cognitive polyphasia, and you can tell me whether I am right or wrong about them. Today is Earth Day as you said, and we know that there is a strong consensus on the seriousness of climate change and the risks around it and our behaviour doesn’t seem to match. A survey that we published today tells us that - to illustrate this point - many of us intend to cycle, walk, and use public transport more often. We want to fly less. We say we are going to save energy at home, recycle more, buy less new stuff and avoid packaged products. We also seem to be quite sunny and positive about the impact of COP26 on the future. But the same survey reveals that we also have a poor grasp of the actions that have the greatest mitigation. For example, we think recycling will help a lot more than it actually does, and we underestimate the impact that living without a car would have. You have referred in the past to *optimism bias* and there seems to be a lot of that here.

**Ben Page** Absolutely. We know that bad things happen. People die. They get ill. People have accidents. People's lives don't turn out the way that they might have expected. But somehow we think that these things apply to other people and not us. And whether you call that wishful thinking, optimism bias or cognitive polyphasia... I mean part of it, as Moscovici says, is that people hold different value systems. Most people believe science: generally, they don't believe that the world is flat. Most modern lives involve a huge amount of technology, but all the many millions who have decided not to have vaccines because they don't quite trust them, or they have read something on a website about them and therefore increase their risk of dying from COVID-19... and you know the guy who did my garden, I argued with him for two years about the vaccine. He kept saying "well I don't really trust it" etc etc. And then he got it and died. I think it is this – he would still use a mobile phone, he would use all sorts, all the products of technology, but then he chose to ignore one product of technology as somehow suspicious. Or dangerous. And that is an interesting set of sort of different value systems going on at the same time.

**Aynsley Taylor** Another finding that we might think is eccentric is that there is an inverse relationship between actual life expectancy in a country and how many citizens of that country expect to live to 100. For example, Japan, the country with the highest life expectancy in the entire world has the lowest proportion of people who think they are going to live to be 100. Why do you think that is?

**Ben Page** Maybe the Japanese are just more realistic. You also need to be aware of a cultural

phenomenon in research when you compare Japanese data with other countries. Japanese respondents tend to say "I don't know" or choose the middle ground in response to answers more than many other countries. Very different from how Americans would answer the same question. So, one needs to be a little bit careful. But it is true that there is a clear optimism bias when you look at people's perceived life expectancy versus the actual life expectancy in their country and it is again this sort of sense that "I know things are worrying or something bad is worrying like death... it is going to be a long way away and I am sure I will deal with it when I get to it". It is a bit like people still take up smoking when we have known since 1950 that it increases your chances of getting cancer massively. There is a fraction of people who smoke and never get cancer of course. And so cognitive polyphasia for smokers is thinking "well somehow I have stopped before the cancer gets to me, or I will be one of the small minority that doesn't kill. And anyway, I want a nice cigarette because I need to relax because I have had a bad day at work. Or my partner is bothering me or something. Somebody is bothering me. So, I will have a cigarette." And I think that that is another example of this near-term needs or thinking and longer-term problem. Cognitive polyphasia is a good way of explaining that.

**Aynsley Taylor** I guess there are two different truths sitting side by side. The near term and the longer term might also explain why the Global Happiness Survey which was published this week found that 67% of us around the world say that we are happy, which is up four percentage points since the midst of the pandemic... which makes sense, no surprises



there. We also found that in high income countries, in Northern Europe, North America and Australia, there seems to be a disconnect between how people feel about their own lives (which is broadly positive, and much more so than the rest of the world) against how they feel about the overall direction of their countries - which is much less positive.

**Ben Page** That has been a phenomenon for a very long time. And it is this sort of – “the country is going to hell in a handcart - but I will probably be OK”. And again, there is a sort of bias there. I mean indeed in our latest survey where we are looking at inflation, which is (as many Ipsos colleagues know) one of my current obsessions, what is interesting is that actually although people are expecting prices to go up, and to exceed any rise in income so that net disposable income will be falling and they are planning to spend less money on things like going out and holidays etc etc... but if you ask overall whether they are optimistic or pessimistic about their own family, over the next year, generally actually people are still pretty positive: somehow they will get through it better than everybody else. That sort of personal optimism bias and pessimism about the rest of the world is a key thing. I mean it is a funny thing about many countries that everybody else is actually much happier than you think they are.

In Asian countries though - and this is a key point - because there has been such a great economic growth over the last thirty to fifty years compared to the West, the change is so dramatic, so many people lifted out of poverty, that the overall level of optimism is just quite different than it is in the West. It is one of the

things that now divides the planet. And as we said in one of our Global Trends reports, a few years ago, if you are in Mumbai, Delhi, Shanghai, Jakarta, you should read this report this way up, because in your society generally people are optimistic about the future. And if you are in Paris, London, New York or Rome, you should read it this way up, because people just tend to pessimism about the future now.

**Aynsley Taylor** We have done some interesting work - which we will probably come back to another time - about the number of children that people think is ideal for families to have, and expectations about the future, and whether people think their own children will have a better life than them. I am using that as a segue to talking about the work that our colleague Darrell Bricker has been doing: he has written and spoken pretty extensively about these demographic trends that are effecting the whole world. And at some point this century, much sooner than we think, global population is going to tip into a long decline and the future is pretty clear in that respect - the trends are pretty much baked in. We are having fewer children, and we are getting older.

And yet, we seem to be in denial about this collectively and culturally. Not just the general public but business and government too. So why do you think this message is taking so long to seep through?

**Ben Page** We are back to the “slow Grey Rhinos”. In Japan you can see the visible impact of population decline, where villages become untenable... and to a certain extent you can see it in parts of Europe - in places in Spain where

everybody has left for the cities. If Italy (which is on course to be the oldest country on Earth) doesn't have more immigration, or its birth-rate doesn't change, there will be lots and lots of empty towns. You know cities will have to be recast. But I think again it is one of those "slow Grey Rhinos" that we talk about where people don't like to go up and confront this slow-moving obvious change. We are generally living much longer than previous generations - and yet we underinvest in pensions, we underinvest in things like social care: care for us when we are older. Even though most people, when you look at their financial planning, they are planning to drop dead by the time they are about 75, when in fact the modal age of death in a lot of Western Europe is now (for women at least) in the mid to late 80s. And people's financial planning isn't keeping pace.

We are just very bad at spotting these slow long-term changes. It is the same in the Perils of Perception series, where we notice that people believe that teenage pregnancy in their country is between 3, 4, 5, or 6 times higher than it

actually is. That is another example of that. So, we seem to be able to hold in our minds these long-term challenges but somehow put them off for tomorrow because somehow something will turn up, or perhaps it won't happen after all. In fairness to people who are experiencing cognitive polyphasia, and we all have it to a certain extent.

You know when I was young, in the 1970s, everybody was worried that by the year 2000, the planet would be starving to death, we wouldn't have been able to produce enough food. And also, we would have run out of key minerals, and metals etc. That was the general concern and yet somehow agriculture became more productive. Actually, women started having fewer children, families declined in many countries. We had fewer children as part of the long-term trend that Darrell Bricker is writing about.

I think because we have sort of got through things... I was terrified of nuclear war when I was growing up in the 1980s, and so far - touch wood, if Mr Putin doesn't do anything mad - forty

**So, some people might say that actually worrying about the here and now, is a perfectly rational way of dealing with things but it does mean that there is an apparent absence of tension between that and these long-term problems that ultimately we do need to deal with as societies. ”**

years later, was I right to be so worried about Ronald Reagan as I was in the early 1980s? So, some people might say that actually worrying about the here and now, is a perfectly rational way of dealing with things but it does mean that there is an apparent absence of tension between that and these long-term problems that ultimately we do need to deal with as societies.

**Aynsley Taylor** Thank you. That was actually a very good segue into my final question, which is about the war in Ukraine. Because we published a new study this week which, among other things, reveals that 61% of us globally say that given the current economic crisis “the country I live in cannot afford to lend financial support to Ukraine”. And it also says that 54% of us say that “paying more for fuel and gas because of sanctions against Russia is worthwhile to defend another sovereign country”.

Now, given these numbers, it seems pretty clear that quite a lot of people agree with both of those statements at the same time. So, what do you make of that? And should we also treat with caution the finding that 40% of us - up to 66% in the UK - say that their country should ban imports of oil and gas from Russia even if this leads to further price increases?

**Ben Page** Well, I think it just shows that opinion polls are quite good! I quite like them, as the Chief Executive of Ipsos. But what I would say is that we are getting people’s snap reactions to a series of questions there, and that is why qualitative work, more deliberative work where people are asked to make trade-offs

or think about different aspects of an issue before reaching more of a conclusion... which of course is what most politicians in most countries have to do... is an important way of really understanding where people are.

So, we have often talked about, and I think you and I have talked about the fact that in our work, we measure opinions, the froth of the surface, the snap reaction to a question. We also measure attitudes, which is slightly deeper. Opinion might be “what did you think of that thing on TV last night?” or I don’t know... “What do you think about sanctions?” ... “Oh, I don’t know, I think this” but then attitudes are perhaps a bit deeper, and values of course are more fundamental. This is “should gay people be allowed to get married?” ... “Should people have children?” ... “Should we execute murderers? Or should we just put them in jail?” ... these types of things. So, we work at different levels, and I think what that shows - those apparent inconsistencies show - is that on Ukraine and the sanctions, most people aren’t actually deciding their country’s sanction regimes. They aren’t deciding their country’s energy policy. They aren’t thinking through this in great detail. A lot of people are studying the news - but not everybody is in minute detail or thinking through the implications... and so you are getting relatively unconsidered views. And we should be honest about that.

Sometimes you might do a snap poll in some countries that show, particularly after a horrible child murder or something, if you do a survey immediately after that has been in the news, you will find that a lot of people in the country might want the reintroduction of capital punishment



- of executing murderers. But of course, when law makers and politicians debate those issues, they often come out and say “actually, no... we have decided not to do that” and that is because that process of debate and consideration leads people to a different place.

And so, I think it is very important in our work to make sure that we understand both the top-of-mind reaction, which we collect very easily, as well as more considered, balanced, or deliberated views and that is why the range of techniques that we use is so important.

**Aynsley Taylor** Thank you. I think I have learned a great deal about cognitive polyphasia today

and that we have also learned about the danger of taking things in isolation. I would just say to anybody listening that if you are going to take anything in isolation around this subject than I think this podcast should be it. Thank you very much Ben for spending the time explaining all that to us.

**Ben Page** No problem. See you all soon.

*This conversation originally took place on 22 April 2022.*

**Listen to this podcast  
and explore the rest  
of the Ipsos collection.**



The Ipsos Views podcasts provide a complementary dive into our publications. These interviews with the authors of our white papers allow you to explore their ideas in more detail, learn more about what led them to their points of view, and offer unique insights and reveal new elements of that thinking.

These podcasts form an important part of our thought leadership programme. Enjoy them on the move, while you work, or whenever you have a moment. You can find the whole series by scanning the QR code alongside, by visiting <https://anchorfm/ipsos> or by subscribing to the Ipsos Views podcast channel on Spotify, Apple, or Google.

To get in touch with any comments, suggestions or ideas, please email [IKC@ipsos.com](mailto:IKC@ipsos.com)