

Social and Behavior Change Working Group

Book Review Form

The opinions expressed in this review are those of the reviewer and do not necessarily reflect the view of CORE or its member agencies.

Book Name: The Hidden Brain

Author(s): Shankar Vedentam

Year Published: 2010

Reviewer/Date: Ann Hendrix-Jenkins, CORE Group. October 12, 2010

Author's argument (or perspective) and summary of the content:

- "Much of our lives take place outside of the boundaries of our own awareness."
- We may think that as educated, self-aware people we are in control of our thoughts and actions, but a great deal of evidence indicates otherwise.
- Bringing our unconscious thoughts and affected behaviors to light is necessary to discover and overcome them. (As with most behavior change, awareness is the first step.)
- Don't always assume our brains are clean machines—sometimes the subconscious takes over as the autopilot. Take back the controls.

Main lessons learned/ applications to work in the international maternal and child health sector (list no more than 8):

Program Design and Implementation

1. In terms of global health programming, the implication is that although people (ourselves, staff, beneficiaries, partners, civil society, etc.) may sincerely state that they are not biased toward [women, other races, other ethnic groups, etc] but that doesn't mean bias isn't happening.
2. We often say we must start with our project staff and consider their attitudes, e.g. within a youth sexuality education project. But Vedentam's portrait implies that we should start with our own subconscious.
3. Issues at hand: race, ethnicity, gender, age, physical appearance, homophobia—and who knows what other biases that may be part of a foreign culture that we as outsiders would have a hard time being aware of.
4. How can we design/implement our efforts to counteract those prejudices?
5. Good quality data is key to understanding how an effort is really are playing out. Look at output, not intent.

Childhood development

6. A Canadian researcher whose work is featured in the book (about children and racism) also happens to be working with ICDDR,B on cognitive development of Bangladeshi children. Her name is Frances Abou. One of her

key messages is that cognitive and social development are interrelated. Much of what children learn is not formally taught to them in an educational setting, but is a result of their environment, starting from infancy: e.g. language acquisition from people talking with them, and the patterns they see in terms of gender, race, ethnicity etc.

<http://centre.icddrb.org/pub/publication.jsp?classificationID=3&pubID=5364>

It's no news to the SBC Working Group: what happens in one's home and community is more powerful than limited project interactions or what they tell you in school.

Reader's professional opinion on the author's argument (perspective) [*i.e. Was his/her point valid? How does the author's view compare to the opinions of CORE and its member organizations?*]

The author takes pains to present his theories in a dispassionate manner, backed up by data that he assesses to be based on good quality research. He is a respected social science columnist—author of the *Department of Human Behavior* for the Washington Post, and has a new column in Slate.

He avoids hyperbole and judgment, and aims for measured discourse, as does CORE and its member organizations. In fact, he makes the case for compassion: often people act in bigoted ways without meaning to. The point is for them—and the society they live in—to change.

On a scale of 1 (not recommend to others in SBC) to 10 (highly recommended for others in SBC) – how would you rate this book?

Nine—interesting, well researched, provocative ideas. I found it personally and professionally illuminating. Some parts can be a bit dry as he outlines the data, but hey, that's what thoughtful science calls for.

Vedentam's...

website: <http://www.hiddenbrain.org/>

new column in Slate: <http://www.slate.com/id/2266463/landing/1>