

Evidence for Change

The 1979 breakthrough research from psychologists and economists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman established a default **1st system, autopilot-thinking**. Naturally disinclined towards the more psychologically demanding **2nd system, slow-thinking**, even important decision-making can become heavily reliant on habit, experience, emotions and intuition. Often non-empirical, autopilot can render us prone to the **predictable irrational mistakes** identified by Richard Thaler, Professor of Behavioural Science & Economics and co-author of Nudge theory. In the absence of sufficient data to make an informed decision, autopilot can anchor to the last available known information, often irrespective of direct relevance or accuracy. As a tool for navigating the complex challenges of everyday life, autopilot can result in the vast majority making seemingly ill-informed, short-sighted and destructive decisions. Behavioural and social science suggest this is biologically and culturally rooted; there is, however, a third, or more accurately put 'sub-category': Pervasive, systemic and institutionalised **behavioural conditioning** and the resulting **conditioned responses**.

Theory of Socioeconomic Traumatic Disorder

That the unattended baby eventually learns not to cry does not evidence self-soothing; it indicates the loss of hope. A preference for 1st system, passive autopilot-thinking over 2nd system, contemplative slow-thinking is established. However, the inference that these behaviours are organically self-informed heuristics disregards the considerable role of behavioural conditioning as a result, for example, of protracted racial, social and or economic inequality, deprivation and injustice and their potential to become catalysts to seemingly wilful, unhealthy and irrational decision-making. It is accepted that much of autopilot behaviour is 'learned', enabling 'behavioural conditioning' to sit comfortably within 1st System thinking; while 'conditioned responses' reasonably qualify as 'intuitive' or 'experience' based and 'habits'.

Supporting evidence for socioeconomic life-altering trauma exists in its individual components: A holistic model of the material and psychological barriers faced by a disaffected individual and or populace in overcoming protracted socioeconomic hardship can reasonably be formed by marrying accepted bodies of work. Professor Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment provides invaluable evidence of the propensity for external forces to impel uncharacteristic, irrational and even inhumane behaviour, requiring the underlying conditions to become a primary focus for intervention. Balanced consideration of **dispositional tendencies** [natural and characteristic mental and or emotional outlook or traits] and **situational forces** [relating to or dependent on a set of circumstances or state of affairs] compels regard for both the underlying conditions and psychology, enabling the development of support solutions with real prospects of success. Understanding how the flaws within situational conditions contribute to inequality and social and economic '*failure*' becomes paramount to unlocking the sustainable transformation necessary to achieve the overriding objective: *To equip and facilitate all citizens to live healthy, fulfilling, productive lives; making a valuable social and economic contribution in so far as each is physically and mentally able, while maintaining good mental well-being and public-health.*

From a Creationist perspective, mankind, modelled in the image and likeness of God, is a contemplative, innovative, creative being; only human beings are capable of 2nd system-thinking—the more efficient response to westernised living. Autopilot default, then, may be a mutative state necessary to facilitate **dissociation** from a rapid-paced, stressful and challenging existence. From any perspective, 1st system thinking is a demonstrably inefficient and unhealthy psychological state to inhabit indefinitely in this scenario. However, based on the Science of

Scarcity research from Sendhil Mullainathan, Professor of Computation & Behavioural Science, this response is not only understandable, without appropriate intervention it is almost certainly inevitable.

The relationship between dissociation, traumatic physical and or psychological events and **post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD]** is well established, with dissociation—a non-psychotic detachment from immediate surroundings, events and or emotional experiences—considered by some to be a subset or subtype of PTSD (the model adopted in this instance). That PTSD can result from traumatic experiences in non-extreme contexts, i.e. workplace bullying, is also widely accepted. Less empirically established is PTSD resulting from sustained psychological trauma due to protracted racial, social and or economic inequality, deprivation and injustice. Separately, or aggregately, these major life events are capable of inflicting considerable psychological trauma and or psychosomatic injury. It is, therefore, a logical progression that sustained and significant socioeconomic hardship is capable of contributing to the manifestation of PTSD. In this scenario, rather than simply being an evolutionary default, the autopilot preference may be viewed as a non-conscious, survival mechanism to the substantive and protracted hardship that, for many, has become the norm. When trauma becomes a way of life, dissociation and imbalance between 1st and 2nd system thinking is inevitable. Coupled with limited resources and or material choices, unhealthy decisions—predictable irrational mistakes—are unavoidable. Mullainathan and professor of psychology, Eldar Shafir, established that the trauma of scarcity can significantly erode cognitive performance, with urgency and desperation usurping long-term strategic thinking and planning. A reduced **psychological bandwidth**, the brains capacity to cope with multiple extreme urgencies, can so affect the way information is perceived and processed that even *obvious* solutions can appear irrelevant and remain unacknowledged. In real-terms, the disaffected are tasked to overcome potentially lifelong struggles they can neither, escape, remedy nor relieve from a position in which they may be contending with various degrees and manifestations of substantive scarcity, PTSD and impaired cognitive abilities. They are required to achieve all of this with little or no specialist support or additional resources while, likely, contending with other cognitive impairments: the psychology of failure, the impact to their self-esteem and problem-solving capabilities; a heightened risk/loss aversion; fear and or the paralysis of a diminished trust in the humanity of others—particularly figures of authority.

The poor are not poor because they make bad decisions; the poor make bad decision because they are poor, concluded Mullainathan. Therefore, responding to the psychological and cognitive barriers, counteracting the situational forces that almost certainly guarantee their failure, and nullifying the impact of scarcity become imperative to affecting real change. Change made easy, intuitive and relevant, sits at the heart of Thaler's 'Nudge' choice architecture, also extolled by Mullainathan. Thoughtfully designed policy and processes can *nudge* the most vulnerable to overcome inequality, social and economic barriers, pre-empting and short-circuiting those predictable irrational mistakes, without compromising freedom of choice.

In 2010 Thaler advised the British Government on the establishment of its Behavioural Insights Team. The incorporation of behavioural and social science in enhancing how local people engage and respond to local, regional and national socioeconomic challenges is the next natural evolution in this field.

Please visit <https://www.edencityoutreach.org.uk> for more information about EDEN City Outreach and research & development collaboration opportunities on this theory, or [Contact Us](#) to request a full copy of our proposal '*Community Support Network [CSN] – a Socially-Sustainable Support Solution*'.