

Friction in the system

There’s friction in the system and it hurts. The two ideas from psychology that can ease our angst.

It’s the beginning of 2021 and the planet is both metaphorically and literally on fire. Yet the increasingly feverish tone in the news isn’t bringing about the seismic change we need.

The feeling caused by the endless environmental awfulness is more than just an increasing feeling of doom, it’s actually painful. There’s a tension to it, a feeling of restlessness, angsty.

There are two theories from the field of psychology that can throw light on the gloom to help us see what’s behind it.

1: https://www.green-alliance.org.uk/resources/Plastic_promises.pdf
2: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-50260687>
3: <https://inews.co.uk/news/environment/war-on-plastic-feature-hidden-microplastics-tea-anita-rani-609888>
4: The Role of Cognitive Dissonance in the Pandemic, Elliot Aronson and Carol Tarvis, The Atcutic. 12.07.20

Theory 1: The war in our heads

First up is cognitive dissonance: Leon Festinger’s theory from the 1950s calls out our inability to hold two opposing cognitions or behaviours at the same time. We need mental harmony, consistency in the way we think and act. When our mind is the turf on which two battling generals fight we experience profound levels of stress.

And that’s what’s happening here. Many of us know deep in our bones that we humans are the architects of major planetary strife. We know that solving these problems means we need to make profound changes in the way we live.

Yet, whilst our attitudes have changed radically our behaviour lags behind. We think ‘plastics are the devil, I’m going to cut down’ and yet every week we find ourselves filling up our bins with plastic. We’re not part of the solution, we’re very much part of the problem.

This isn’t caused by a lack of desire to change, but rather a lack of means. Usually there are different ways we can reduce dissonance to restore mental harmony: let’s say for example we see ourselves as healthy eaters but then we keep eating crisps; to reduce the dissonance between our attitude and behaviour we can either:

- A. Change the attitude** - in moderation, crisps aren’t that bad for me
- B. Change the behaviour** - I will stop eating crisps or
- C. Justify it by adding new behaviours** - I will run every day I eat crisps.

These fixes aren’t so easily available when it comes to sustainability. Let’s work through them taking plastics as an example:

- A. Change attitude:** plastics aren’t so bad. There’s too much evidence and logic around the issues of plastics to become a non-believer

- B. Change the behaviour:** eliminate plastics. This is hard to do without making quite radical shifts in how and what you buy i.e. avoid supermarkets (who put 900 pieces of single use plastic on their shelves for every person in the UK¹) or giving up whole categories of products like cosmetics. Granted these aren’t impossible, but they’re a much bigger deal than applying some willpower
- C. Justify it via new behaviour** - carbon offsetting is the equivalent of going for a run to burn off the carbs. Whilst it can help alleviate the guilt of flying in particular it isn’t without problems and besides, it isn’t linked into everyday purchase on any significant scale. Before you even get on to the issue of the added cost. A is a no go. B is incredibly hard. C doesn’t work to resolve the tension.

Some of our most frequently used daily items still can’t be recycled, from coffee cups, sandwich packets², even tea bags, all contain plastic that the average user can’t separate for recycling³.

I have a drawer in my bathroom of empty cosmetics bottles, old mascara tubes, moisturiser jars that sort of thing. I can’t face throwing them into landfill, the packaging is either too heavy or too expensive looking. But every attempt I’ve made to recycle over the years has fallen flat. I emailed Beauty Pie the other day, who make quite a play of their eco credentials, to ask if I can send my bottles back to them, I would pay postage. The response from their Customer Happiness Team: ‘It’s too expensive’.

So I’m supposed to dump these pots in landfill, whilst they are using more raw materials and energy to make more of the exact same pots. It’s totally crackers. So I hoard them.

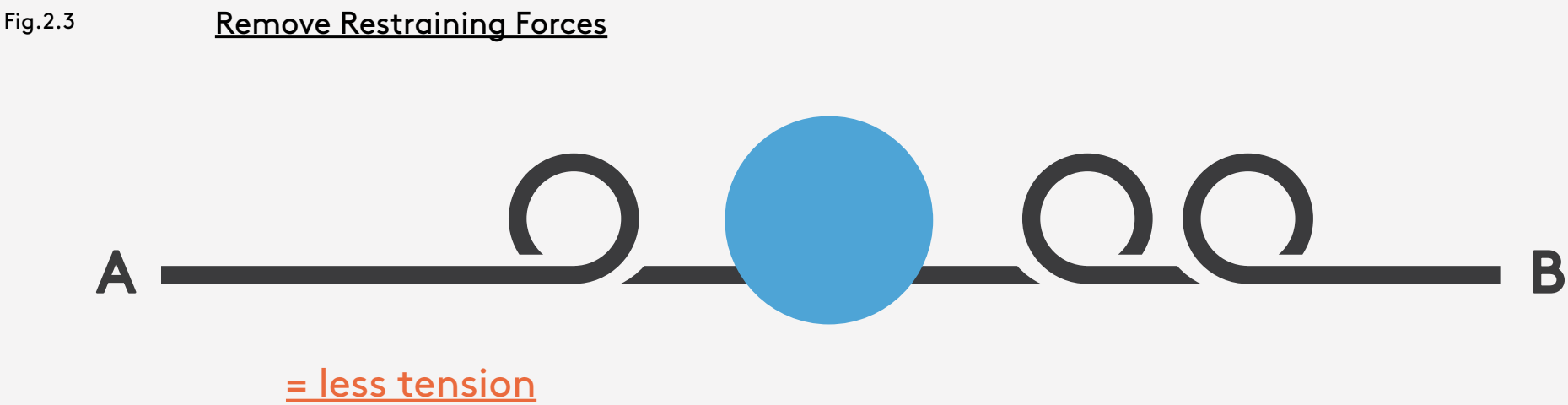
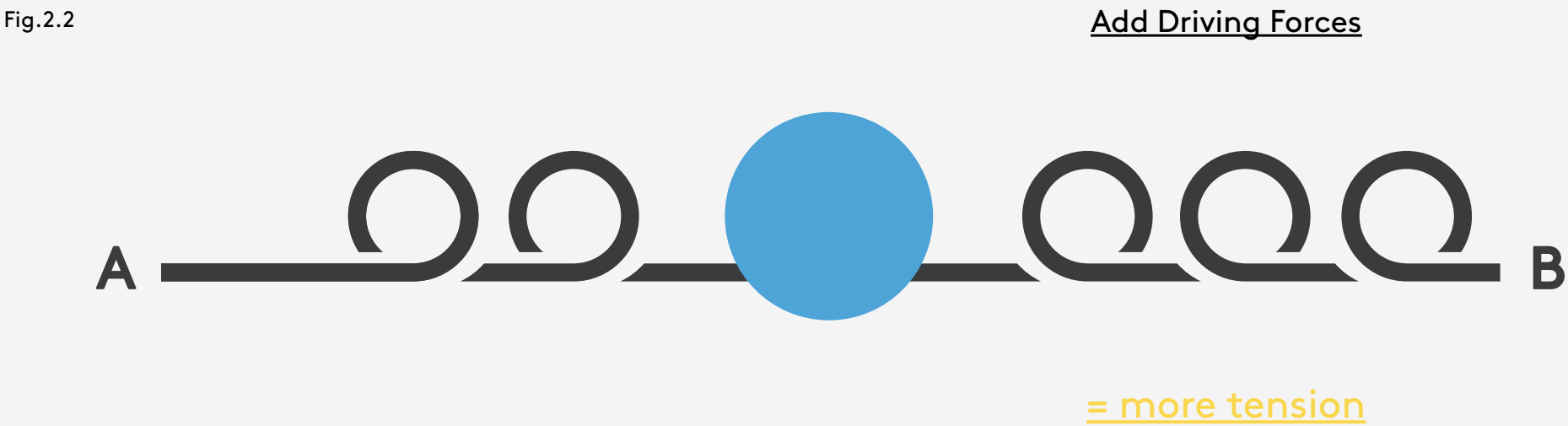
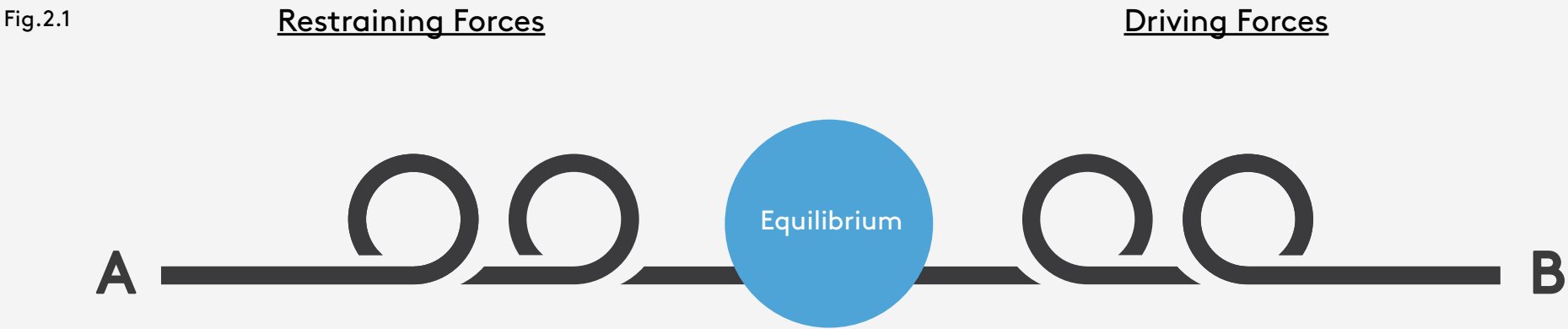
“Dissonance is most painful when evidence strikes at the heart of how we see ourselves—when it threatens our belief that we are kind, ethical, competent, or smart⁴.”

We can’t even get off the sustainability starting blocks and it hurts.

Fig.1. The cognitive dissonance of a crisp addict



Fig.2 Imagine coils holding a object in place, the coils on the left hold it back towards A, those on the right pull it forwards to B. If they are equal they are in equilibrium



Theory 2: There’s a good and a bad way to do it

If the first theory talks about the internal effect of friction, our mental unease. This second idea looks at why all of this increasing noise around sustainability isn’t leading to bigger shifts in mainstream behaviours, why we don’t have the means to solve our dissonance.

Nobel winning psychologist Daniel Kahneman heard an idea from Kurt Lewin in his 20s that he proclaimed the most exciting psychological idea he’s ever heard, it’s about how to get people to change their behaviour. It goes like this: there are two main factors at play in changing behaviour - driving forces, those things that propel you forwards and restraining forces - those things that hold you back from doing something.

When seeking to move people from A to B our instinct is to increase the driving forces (Fig 2.2), to increase the incentives that further proper people towards A. But a better way to do it is to ask why they aren’t moving towards B naturally, to remove those restraining forces that get in the way (Fig 2.3).

In fact if you just increase the driving forces without removing the restraining forces you increase tension in the system - the bad way to do it (Fig 2.2).

Which is exactly what’s happening around sustainability. Every new doom-filled story acts as a driving force for us to change our behaviour - thus the coils in the springs on the right hand side increase. Yet the powers that be aren’t removing the restraining factors (i.e. allowing us recycle our everyday items easily, making it easy to buy without plastic, making healthy food the same prices or less than heavily processed food). In fact in many ways they are making it harder, the potential US trade deal will allow cheaper and lower welfare meat to flood the UK. So there are too many coils on the right hand side, the pressure builds.

I’m not suggesting removing the driving forces altogether but imagine if we really followed Lewin’s insight through and shifted our focus to the removal of restraining forces, think of all the friction we’d remove from our lives and from our minds.

What are these theories really telling us?

We all know innately, with or without Festinger, that the only way to feel okay again is align our behaviour with our attitude. Yes we need companies to step up and stop treating sustainability as a side project. But the only thing we can ever control is our own behaviour. Is the real issue here not that companies aren’t making it miraculously easy for us to fix our dissonance but rather that we haven’t been honest with ourselves, collectively, about what level of change is required? It’s not enough to swap small everyday items, we need to change whole axis around which our lives are built.

Yes we need to **fix the every day decisions** we make, such as if they can’t make recyclable coffee cups, we can’t have a takeaway coffee unless we remember our cups. Ever.

But also..

The way we organise our lives. Perhaps as we can’t shop in the same way anymore, supermarkets will always need to heavily package stuff for safe delivery and long life, we need to factor time into our lives again for going to local shops and buying just what we need. Do we need to work less hours to make up for the extra leg work this will take.

But also...

Our self identities. We can’t have all the bottles in the bathroom, the clothes in the wardrobe, all the technology upgrades, the endless data storage. All those consumables that have helped us build up who we are.

We keep believing there’s a win-win-win situation - for us, business and the planet - but if you step back that’s magical thinking at it’s illusionary best. And we can’t keep pretending the tech will save us, server farms have a greater carbon footprint than the aviation industry⁵.

Back in the day when life got too much we used to be able to rely on the failsafe combination of David Attenborough and a cup of tea on a Sunday afternoon, but even these now come with a health warning. We’ve lost our escapism, time to fix our reality.

Final footnote: Beauty brands have been particularly slow to embrace recycling, there have been a number of schemes that started and failed over the years. Finally L’Oreal is stepping up by partnering with TerraCycle to put recycling bins in stores to take back all cosmetics. And Boots have finally started up a scheme, albeit limited. Well done to them, I shall be seeking one out with a suitcase full of empties. But this is sustainability 1.0, it should have been fixed a decade ago.

5: <https://www.independent.co.uk/environment/global-warming-data-centres-consume-three-times-much-energy-next-decade-experts-warn-a6830086.html>