Mapping and evaluating behaviour-change agendas for policy innovation

Brian Head

University of Queensland

brian.head@uq.edu.au

Brian Head (University of Queensland)

Mapping and evaluating behaviour-change agendas for policy innovation

Summary

This paper traces the rise and diffusion of new "behavioural" approaches to policy or communications instruments. The aim of these approaches is to provide innovative approaches for targeted "behavioural change". These behavioural approaches are mainly anchored in cognitive psychology and behavioural economics, and are increasingly being applied to public policy design and evaluation.

The intellectual pedigree of these ideas can be traced back several decades. The 'behavioural' social sciences (in psychology, economics, sociology and political science) were consolidated in the 1950s and 1960s, while also importantly, the 'evaluation' sciences (aiming at program effectiveness) expanded rapidly in the 1960s and 1970s and have continued to develop in recent years.

Proponents of the applied behavioural policy movement since 2000 have refreshed and elaborated such knowledge in new ways. Their claims to innovation generally focus on applying techniques of experimentation to specific challenges. The 'value proposition' underlying the expansion and diffusion of this approach is that behavioural-experimentalism promises to provide rigorous information for decision-making, through which better decisions can be made. By focusing on the individual-level 'micro-foundations' that underpin how both citizens and managers select information and make choices, it is assumed that institutional-level processes can be better understood and managed. More specifically, this approach can help managers design processes that encourage desirable individual behaviours.

Many of these behavioural initiatives in the last decade have been associated either with 'choice architecture' (*Nudge*, or 'liberal paternalism') or with the breadth of experimental methods and controlled trials ('test, learn, adapt') advocated by Behavioural Insights Teams in the UK and in several other countries. These recent initiatives have moved well beyond academic research centres into policy development and process improvement units within government agencies. A wave of policy diffusion has gained momentum, encouraged by consultants, government policy units, and university-based applied Policy Labs in several countries; while the OECD itself has sponsored several conferences and surveys of international experience.

Questions and issues

This paper tackles five main questions and issues:

1. How can we map the main intellectual foundations of these approaches?

- o note the importance of much earlier behavioural traditions since the 1950s
- o 'behavioural economics', itself largely grounded in cognitive psychology, has been a relative late-comer compared with public health, social marketing, human factors safety research, regulatory incentives, and program evaluation.
- o inter-disciplinary social sciences can provide a stronger base for designing policy interventions than either economics or psychology alone
- o many of the most significant recent initiatives are beginning to take a broader view than RCT experimentalism and micro-choice research.

2. Can we identify some reasons for the increasing popularity and diffusion of these approaches?

- o key explanations seem to be linked to the rhetorical appeal of the 'innovation' agenda and its ties to the 'efficiency' agenda, both of which can attract support across the ideological divide
- o the benefits of cost efficiencies within public bureaucracies in an era of ongoing fiscal austerity
- o the attractions of low-cost voluntarist approaches in contrast to strong regulation alternatives with their higher costs of monitoring/enforcement
- o claims of improved effectiveness in terms of compliance levels or other program outcomes
- o it is more than a fad dependent on a handful of champions.

3. What are the favoured methodologies found in Nudge/BI experimental approaches?

- o field trials and/or RCTs have generally been seen as essential
- o such methods have previously been widely adopted within the policy-oriented social sciences, and have long been advocated by many think tanks, research units, evaluation consultancies, and professional bodies
- o as the fields of application continue to expand, more pragmatic (non-RCT) approaches will be found to be necessary.

4. What are the favoured priorities and most common client/target groups found in Nudge/BI experimental approaches?

- o initial focus on 'harvesting the low-hanging fruit' to demonstrate success and build momentum
- o many projects have focused on transaction efficiencies or business process simplifications, including sending text reminders to keep appointments or reinforce previous choices
- o projects have been initiated across many domains – taxation, transport, employment, environment, health, family services, financial literacy, etc
- o most are aimed at more effective implementation within programs where goals are already established
- o exploratory projects, requiring rethinking the problems and the pathways to solutions, have been less frequent
- o the most common client/target groups seem to have been citizens who are more likely to make 'poor choices' in terms of lifestyle or wellbeing.

5. What are the strengths and limitations of these approaches?

- o 'methodology-driven' approaches may tend to focus on relatively simple problems of administrative efficiency and client communications
- o major policy issues have not yet been the central focus
- o however, Nudge/BI approaches can make important contributions to tackling more complex problems *in conjunction with* other social science approaches.

Conclusion

The paper suggests that many of the claims to novelty and innovation are exaggerated; that the techniques utilised so far have largely had a focus on micro processes of individual choice and perception; that the explanatory power of the experimental information is quite restricted and needs to be up-scaled in longitudinal studies; and that the 'big' problems need to be tackled by inter-disciplinary approaches that include contextual and institutional analyses utilising cross-sectoral and experience-based knowledge.

References

A reference list of 300 items has been compiled.