



Silver bullets need a careful aim

Dilemmas in applying behavioural insights

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About Us

Behaviour Change and Psychological Governance ESRC Seminar Series

This seminar series, funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (2013-15), is a collaboration between the Universities of Birmingham, Aberystwyth, Bristol and Durham. The principal investigator is Jessica Pykett, a Human Geographer at the University of Birmingham.

The series explores the use of behavioural science in contemporary techniques of governing, investigating the potential effects of psychological forms of governance on national populations and specific social groups. The seminars aim to better understand the unintended consequences of the use of psychology in public policy, and the underlying assumptions and principles on which they are based.

Seminars in this series have to date examined the future use of neuroscience in architecture and urban design, a policy focus on psychological resilience in education and happiness economics, and philosophical accounts of change, habits and human action.

psychologicalgovernance.wordpress.com



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Collaborative Change® is a change consultancy specialising in the application of behavioural insights.

We work with clients across sectors to address organisational and community challenges using behaviour change principles.

By applying a behavioural lens we enable clients to see existing challenges in a new light, creating fresh opportunities for intervention, innovation and positive disruption.

With change challenges properly translated into behaviour challenges, we help clients understand the true barriers to change within their organisation or community.

This understanding then allows us to apply the vast range of insights emerging from the behavioural sciences literature to create meaningful, measurable change.

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Summary

There are many popular and accessible accounts extolling of the virtue of behavioural insights for public policy makers and commercial marketers. By contrast there are very few reports which provide an overarching appraisal of the current application of behavioural insights. This review outlines some of the principal ethical and political dilemmas raised by the influence of behavioural science on public policy as critical evaluations of this policy agenda have accrued over the past 10 years. Rather than providing a blueprint for ethical forms of behaviour change, it is intended to open up a space to collectively consider what might be the best course of action in shaping behaviour change interventions.

Introduction: from silver bullets to gold standards

The emergence and global spread of public policies informed by behavioural science promises to furnish several national governments with a sophisticated set of insights which will make policy more effective, less costly and more in tune with the natural pre-dispositions and preferences of citizens. 'Behaviour change' has become a silver bullet in the regulatory armoury, intended at once to guarantee individual choice and improve the overall health, wealth and wellbeing of the population.

Within this framework, citizens are no longer addressed by governments in a blanket approach which treats them as the rational automata of classical economic theory. Instead policies are shaped around our psychological and behavioural tendencies, drawing on observations from disciplines such as Behavioural Economics and Social Psychology. These policies are tested and developed in an experimental mode, using Randomised Controlled Trials as the gold standard to determine what works, and draw on long-standing methods from consumer and social marketing in the careful design of decision-making environments to solicit behaviours aligned with the public good.

Over the past decade, a wide range of ethical and political concerns have been raised by commentators, practitioners and academics regarding the application of behavioural insights, including 'nudge' type policies, the 'behaviour change agenda' and consumer and social marketing approaches to public policy. This report outlines just some of those ethical and political dilemmas, arguing that adopting a behavioural approach requires 'ethical proofing' just as much as tests for effectiveness.

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An ethical toolkit for applying behavioural insights

In addressing the ethical and governance considerations of the application of behavioural insights in public policy and commercial marketing, it is worth keeping in mind the positive outcomes and achievements of such practices.

For instance, the UK's Behavioural Insights Team has reported significant cost savings to the public purse. So too, policies which are shaped around both individual choice and public welfare have wide appeal across the political spectrum, favoured both by those fearful of bigger and more interventionist government as well as by those seeking to retain an active role for the state in improving health, wealth and wellbeing.

But the application of behavioural insights has also raised a number of substantive dilemmas which need to be considered in the design, delivery and evaluation of behaviour change interventions.

Here we draw on existing critiques of the behaviour change agenda to provide a series of ethical prompts to be considered in the application of behavioural interventions. Whilst not an exhaustive list, it offers a starting point to support policy makers and practitioners to establish some of the underlying political and ethical principles and dilemmas concerning behaviour change.

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01

Is the behavioural intervention open to challenge

The idea of a nudge, as a carefully designed prompt for decision-making, to a certain degree relies on that prompt operating at a **subconscious** level. It might serve to prime the decision-maker (as in the famous example of the 'fly in the urinal') or to anchor their decision to a sensible starting point (such as a raised minimum payment on a credit card bill which will actually ensure that you end up paying this off). It might use a trusted messenger or highlight adherence to a social norm in order to engender an emotional driver for delivering an intervention. Or it may target our pre-disposition for loss aversion by designing behavioural programmes which foreground disincentives rather than incentives.

Many of these kinds of behavioural interventions are said to work by governing affects; the non-cognitive aspects of human decision-making associated with our fast, intuitive and emotional thinking system. By contrast, a nudge might equally be aimed at harnessing a stated commitment, such as in smoking cessation programmes in which the smoker signs their own pledge to give up, perhaps sharing this with friends and family on social media. Whilst this clearly pulls some emotional strings, it is the smoker's very conscious effort to give up which is the target of this kind of intervention. We can see that different kinds of behavioural insights carry with them different degrees of **consent**, openness, transparency and accountability.

This leads many commentators to question whether nudges will work if citizens are **aware** of them, others pointing to the dangers of manipulation and trickery at play in the traditional conception of nudges.

Indeed, in their experimental trial of nudging citizens towards organ-donation, Peter John and colleagues (2013) found that nudges of which their research participants were not aware were more effective than open discussion about the merits of organ-donation. Crucially however, this didn't lead them to the conclusion that nudges were therefore the best course of action. Instead they contend that deliberative discussion is a more democratic means of (a) improving people's decision-making capacity and (b) agreeing on what specific public goods should be the target of an intervention.

But are the kinds of nudges which target our emotional (as opposed to rational) drivers of decision-making necessarily suspicious? Particularly if these have been subjected to parliamentary debate? What are the ethical implications of the apparent paradox of **openly manipulating** the contexts in which citizens make decisions? Given that the behavioural economic insight on which many nudges are based is built directly upon the contention that we do not and cannot rationally discern the reasons for our behaviours, some are sceptical of the democratic value of securing a general level public permission for nudging (Adam Oliver, 2015).

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This question has been addressed by Julian Le Grand and Bill New (2015) who consider how transparency and accountability measures might be put in place by governments pursuing libertarian paternalist policies, focussing on the role of parliamentary debate, elections and retrospective referendum as essential means for states to justify their actions. An ability to 'expose' nudges and provide checks and balances on their use would

be important in ensuring that the claims of nudges to increase wellbeing are not done in manipulative and subliminal ways. But whilst Le Grand and New are broadly supportive of nudges, they argue that it is not transparency but substantive autonomy which should be the primary ethical consideration. For many political theorists, this relates not just to having options and choices but the resources and opportunity to exercise significant freedoms.

What to do: Make behavioural interventions transparent and deliberative.

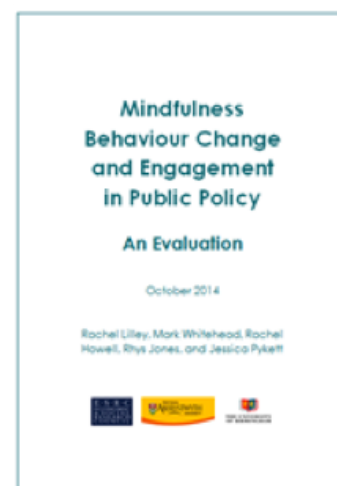
Make behavioural interventions transparent and deliberative. Rachel Lilley has combined her experience as a behaviour change/sustainability expert and mindfulness teacher to develop a Mindfulness, Behaviour Change and Engagement in Public Policy (MBCEPP) programme. This is in partnership with researchers at the Universities of Aberystwyth and Birmingham (Lilley et al., 2014). By combining mindfulness techniques in a group setting and education about behavioural science, participants are given an open space of inquiry and discussion, exploring the psychological biases which may affect their behaviour and that of others. This will potentially mean they are better able to identify subconscious nudges. Here, mindfulness is not used as a form of therapy but as a tool of social change. The programme is currently being trialled with the Welsh Government, Global Action Plan and Ogilvy Change.

<http://changingbehaviours.wordpress.com>

Ethical considerations

- Are citizens aware of the behavioural intervention?
- Should nudge approaches which bypass the conscious agent be permitted?
- Is the citizen able to consent to the intervention?
- Do different types of nudges have different ethical considerations?
- What are the transparency measures that need to be put in place?
- Have the end goals of the intervention been publically debated?
- Does the intervention allow people to pursue their own end goals?

In democracies, where public policy makers ought to be held to standards of transparency, requiring public permission at only the general policy level would allow governments much scope to overstep what many might feel to be the limits of their authority.”
(Adam Oliver, 2015: p5)



An evaluation of the MBCEPP programme with the Welsh Government (Lilley et al, 2014)

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02

What is the legitimacy of the behavioural expert?

The application of behavioural insights primarily involves shaping the contexts in which decisions are made. In Nudge, Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein (2008) propose that states become '**choice architects**', using the skills and techniques of framing, priming and default rules which have long been successful in the commercial sector. A key assertion is that decision-making contexts can never be neutral – they have always been designed by somebody. It is therefore seen as imperative that states are not 'crowded out' by louder and more canny messengers and marketers, competing for citizens' attention.

In this sense, the **training and development** of civil servants and policy makers in the knowledge of behavioural science and tactics of behaviour change interventions are an essential part of the administration and mainstreaming of a behavioural approach to governance. A new cadre of behavioural experts has therefore emerged both in government and within a 'behaviour change industry' made up of for-profit companies, non-governmental organisations, social enterprises and private consultancies. A key ethical question is whether training in behavioural science gives these experts the right kind of tools to facilitate an empowering form of behaviour change which listens to people, engages people in understanding how to achieve their own goals and sheds light on the constraints which might hinder their actions. Many critical social scientists

are sceptical that behavioural insights will adequately address the uneven distribution of the resources that people need to take control of their lives (Per-Anders Tengland, 2012: 147).

Behavioural approaches often appeal to scientific proof as the foundation for interventionist forms of government where citizens can no longer be trusted to make the kinds of decisions which will be good for themselves and others. In these circumstances it is important to consider and question both the form of expertise forwarded by behaviour change interventions and the **accountability** of the agencies responsible for delivering them.

Critics have questioned whether the application of behavioural insights therefore poses a threat to individuals' moral **autonomy**. Economist, Gilles Saint-Paul (2011) takes a strong liberal position against state paternalism of any sort – arguing that this undermines individual **responsibility** and **liberty**. Those who by contrast favour an active role for government intervention in shaping behaviour and ensuring citizen welfare still question the effects of taking expertise out of the hands of citizens. If we start treating people as flawed, vulnerable to biases, as impulsive as Homer Simpson, then people might just start acting this way (Rhys Jones, Jessica Pykett and Mark Whitehead, 2013).

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For others, there is a predictable **paradox** at play in the way in which nudge techniques increase intervention in the private lives of citizens at the same time as the reduction of state responsibility within a free market (David Chandler, 2013).

The RSA's Social Brain project has forwarded one way that behavioural insights should be explored by the very people who are targets of such interventions. Through mindfulness and developmental learning workshops, they propose that

people will become more 'neurologically reflexive' – they will develop expertise on their own behavioural biases and learn to control contain and rationalize them (Jonathon Rowson, 2011). In a related way, **user-centred design** principles in which ethnographic forms of expertise are given some credence, provide an alternative to targeting people's failures in reasoning, ensuring that the perspectives of citizens themselves are not forgotten in the rush to design effective and behaviourally-informed interventions.

What to do: Involve users as experts in their own behaviour.

Designer and researcher Dr Dan Lockton developed the Design with Intent toolkit (see Lockton et al, 2013) based on groups ('lenses') of behavioural insights, in order to help people to generate ideas about how to influence behaviour through co-design. This co-design approach has been used in concert with qualitative interviews and ethnographic methods, for example, to better understand home energy use, highlighting the importance of energy's 'invisibility' and person-centred notions of thermal 'comfort' in the home (Lockton 2014).

<http://designwithintent.co.uk>

Ethical considerations

- Is the moral autonomy of the citizen maintained?
- Can the organisation designing the behavioural intervention be held to account?
- Is the citizen given opportunity to learn about their own biases or from their mistakes?
- Who decides the end goals/public goods to be pursued?
- How can citizens themselves be involved in understanding their own behaviour?

“Once the human subject is understood as lacking in the capacity to make “free choices,” the private sphere of freedom and autonomy becomes problematized and “life”—that is, the formally private sphere beyond and separate from the public sphere of government— becomes the subject of governance.”

David Chandler (2013: 214)



Design With Intent Toolkit Photo: Dan Lockton

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03

Is behaviour the real problem to be tackled?

While many behavioural insights are concerned with the immediate decision-making moment and the situation in which decisions are made, several critics have pointed out that there is a much broader **context** for decision-making, habit and norm formation and behaviour which needs to be taken into account if effective and sustainable forms of change are to be achieved. Public Policy researcher, Peter Wells (2010), finds the nudge framework to lack any substantive consideration of the material resources often necessary to make behavioural changes, and argues that it pays scant regard **unequal situations** in which people find themselves.

Similarly, geographers have pointed out the naïve sense of space forwarded in the application of behavioural insights (Jones, Pykett and Whitehead, 2013). The spaces in which we make decisions are not limited to our immediate environs and choice architectures – this narrow view of space as trigger for individual decision-making is problematic because it denies the cultural, social, political and economic **driving forces** which shape those very spaces and the social interactions which they cultivate.

Sociologist, Elizabeth Shove (2010) has outlined a similar concern about the behaviour change agenda with reference to how it is being applied to address the problem of climate change. She sees the dominant policy concern with the ABC of 'attitude, behaviour and choice' as a significant obstacle for effectively tackling this problem. By **framing the problem** of climate

change as an issue of flawed attitudes, individual behaviours, inner psychologies and free choices, pro-environmental interventions informed by behavioural science tend to limit themselves to what she describes as fairly trivial goals (e.g. not wasting water while brushing your teeth), and by implication, reinforcing a sense of helplessness in the face of planetary crisis.

Medical sociologist, Paul Crawshaw highlights similar reservations about the use of social marketing techniques in health promotion. By targeting lifestyle and personal choices rather than more **structural interventions** he argues, such techniques may even exacerbate health inequalities and exclusion because they may not reach people in the poorest health whose sense of agency and choice is already limited by their personal, physical and social contexts.

It is therefore important to question how the use of behavioural insights as policy levers is itself a political move, which serves to frame specific problems in particular ways. Looking at problems in the round involves mobilising more actors than individual citizens. More **traditional regulatory techniques**, taxes and disincentives, legislation and mandatory requirements, and the work of parliament, government agencies, commercial organisations and charities are all required to engender change, as would no doubt be acknowledged by policy strategists themselves. A focus on behaviour could limit the effectiveness, sustainability and reach of interventions.

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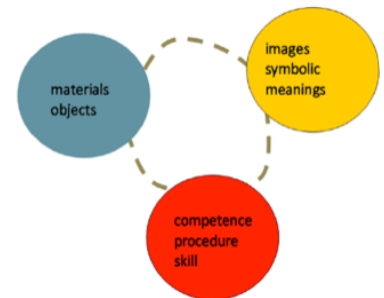
What to do: Consider alternative ways of understanding the problem.

Elizabeth Shove and colleagues' (2012) social practice approach argues that there has been too much emphasis on behaviour and not enough time spent considering change. They argue for a need to consider how materials and objects, images, symbols and meanings, and people's competences and skills work together to produce social practices (rather than de-contextualised individual behaviours) which drive human activity in particular directions. So, a problem such as climate change in this view is not sensibly addressed by individual choices, sacrifices and habits, but by the transformation of the historically-specific socio-technical system which has created the situation of overconsumption of energy and climate change itself. Tinkering around with behaviour is no substitute here for radically challenging the status quo and having long term goals.

<http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/staff/shove/choreography/table.htm>

Ethical considerations

- Does the emphasis on Behavioural Economics and nudge blinker policy professionals and behaviour change practitioners to other approaches and paradigms?
- Does the political appetite for Behavioural Economics create the risk of issues less conducive to such tactics being overlooked or de-prioritised?
- What forms of knowledge and understanding are obscured in the enthusiasm for a behavioural science approach?
- Can Behavioural Economics tactics create sustainable behavioural change as well as influence choice or trigger one-off behaviours?
- Does the concept of the 'social' forwarded in Social Psychology shed any light on structural drivers of behaviour?



'Three Elements model', developed from the work of Elizabeth Shove (Source: Tim Chatterton, 2011:24).

“Given its libertarian roots it is therefore not surprising that [Nudge] gives scant regard to issues of welfare, redistribution and inequality. Issues which highlight structural and geographical factors in explaining inequality are entirely absent.”

Peter Wells (2010: 117)

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04

What might be the unintended consequences of behavioural interventions?

Whether you take the sceptical (or conspiratorial) view that the 'behaviour change agenda' is a centrally orchestrated political programme aimed at changing the collective will of the people, or the more sympathetic view that it provides a new set of tools to make government work much more efficiently, it is still important to consider both the **cumulative effects** and potential **unintended consequences** of more wide-spread forms of behavioural governance (House of Lords, 2011).

Education scholar, Kathryn Ecclestone (2012) highlights the way in which the appeal to behavioural science by governments produces citizens who are deemed too vulnerable to make effective decisions for themselves. This flawed decision-maker as characterised by behavioural science turns vulnerability into an inevitable and universal attribute. She argues that this paves the way for a **therapeutic culture** to emerge, obscuring moral and political questions about what it means to live a good life, as well as side-stepping concerns about oppressions and injustices which may cause vulnerability.

Critics have also drawn attention to the implicit **gendered politics** of behaviour change, particularly in the contention that government should play a role in helping people to overcome their emotional cognitive systems and be more rational (Jessica Pykett, 2012). One unintended consequence of application of behavioural insights might therefore be de-legitimise emotional ways of knowing and being.

Even though behavioural economics is recognised in heralding the end of rational economic man, this has arguably been replaced by a rationalising psychological 'man'. This has the effect of obscuring the impact of gendered and power relations on both people's material and symbolic capacity to change their behaviours, and on determining what is deemed acceptable behaviour in the first place. It may also lead to a **fragmented sense of self** unable to develop morally (Luc Bovens, 2009).

It is therefore important to consider how existing relationships of power are affected when designing behavioural interventions. Considering people's unequal access to the **resource and opportunity** required to take specific actions or change their behaviours is an important first step. This was particularly seen to be the case in the Behavioural Insights Team's controversial experiment in JobCentres, where welfare claimants were subjected to psychometric tests to assess their character traits in relation to job seeking. As critical psychologists John Cromby and Martin Willis (2014) have argued, by re-framing 'worklessness' through psychological science, this application of behavioural science fed directly into divisions between 'strivers' and 'skivers', downplaying the structural causes of unemployment and the political-economic transformation of welfare provision under government austerity.

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Thinking through the potentially differential impact of interventions on people from different social groups is a second crucial consideration. It is worth bearing in mind whether segmenting audiences, for instance, can have the effect of pigeon-holing certain social groups. In this way, behavioural interventions based on techniques of consumer insight and geodemographics can very quickly become targeted at social groups deemed less sophisticated or rational than others.

Dividing up the population in this way can of course itself lead to **social divisions**. A key ethical consideration is that a clear assessment is made of how the 'public good' to be achieved by the behavioural intervention will be distributed amongst affected populations (Per-Anders Tengland, 2012: 140).

In his consideration of the politics of behaviour change, political sociologist, Will Leggett (2013) highlights that the role of the state in promoting behavioural interventions must necessarily be distinct from schemes offered by non-state agencies. In his view, the state is not just one voice amongst many, and must not be absolved of its responsibility to expose specific choice architectures and **empower** citizens to critically engage with attempts to shape their behaviour. He offers a more hopeful account of nudges, arguing that they contain within them the potential to highlight just how political the micro-structures of decision-making can be. In this account, low cost but highly sophisticated behavioural interventions can be successfully adopted as much by community groups and citizens as they can by powerful state and corporate agencies.

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What to do: Design empowering behavioural interventions.

Collaborative Change is a behaviour change approach based on empowerment and co-design principles. The approach is built around five basic principles: Engage, Motivate, Empower, Trust and Ownership. Using ethnographic research and insight techniques, they seek to empower people to be able to better understand their own values and motivations, frame problems themselves and develop solutions. They aim to understand the complexity of behaviour in a local context using in-depth qualitative research methods to develop solutions with specific social groups.

<http://www.collaborativechange.org.uk>



Ethical considerations

- Behavioural Economics focuses on universal cognitive dynamics. How can we ensure it responds to the diversity of our communities and their needs?
 - Can 'nudge' approaches have negative unintended consequences—such as crowding out or diminishing intrinsic motivation, or producing emotionally vulnerable subjects?
 - How might future technological developments (e.g. big data; wearable biosensors, smart cities) affect the application of behavioural insights and raise new ethical dilemmas?
 - Can 'nudge' create long-term, sustainable change across a range of contexts?
 - How can we avoid behavioural interventions that might be divisive or stigmatising?
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“The contemporary politics of behaviour change are characterised by a ‘diminished’ view of human nature that emerges from, and reinforces, a cultural therapeutic ethos rooted in determinist assumptions about emotional and psychological vulnerability.”

Kathryn Ecclestone (2012: 475)

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05

Is what works the best thing to do?

The application of behavioural insights enjoys the **scientific validity** of several decades of research in behavioural economics and social psychology. So too it is increasingly turning to well-known methods from the medical sciences to establish 'what works' in public policy. Using Randomised Controlled Trials in which one or more groups of research participants are subject to an intervention whilst a control group is not, RCTs are described by the UK's Behavioural Insights Team and other national governments as the 'gold standard' for evaluating policy.

However, the use of RCTs in evidence based policy making is **not beyond contestation** (see Cartwright, 2007; Hammersley, 2008). Starting with some obvious observations, first there is the cost of providing such highly involved experimental empirical evidence for each and every policy proposal or intervention. Some policy makers and service deliverers will no doubt find the need for an RCT both constraining and dogmatic. Second, RCTs are not the only form of evidence which can evaluate the success of a behavioural intervention. Qualitative or ethnographic insight, based on sustained engagement with clients, service users or citizens provide alternative means of research to inform policy. The downgrading of these forms of knowledge, coupled with an irrational fear of 'bias' in qualitative research have been much criticised (Davies, 2014).

So too, **alternative statistical methods** such as proportional matching/iterative proportional fitting should not be too readily dismissed. Here, the potential impact of interventions can be assessed by using existing databases to examine the response of people with similar demographic characteristics to an intervention or policy

change. These require a different set of skills and training from that required by RCT evaluations. Both of these methods, however, put a considerable amount of faith in expert knowledge, potentially obscuring the value of lay perspectives.

Moreover, as Warren Pearce and Sujatha Raman (2014) have noted, **science and politics** cannot be considered in isolation, and as we have already noted, the way in which problems are framed can have significant ramifications for solutions and interventions to be presented for testing, as well as the status of knowledge from those deemed to be experts. Putting the science of behavioural science in its specific social and political context is thus a crucial part of evaluating its potential impact and avoiding political scientism.

Providing narrowly technocratic assessments of what works in one highly standardised experimental situation is deemed to have low external validity, and can also serve to obscure the terms by which particular interventions have come to be piloted and tested. So too the **drive for certainty** and statistical truth can detract from the fact that social interventions necessarily always take place within dynamic systems, with people responding in unpredictable ways. Broader understandings of **how societies change** should not therefore be dismissed in the current enthusiasm for behavioural science.

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What to do:

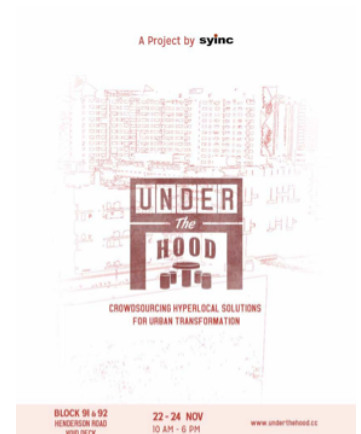
Value diverse types of evidence and insight.

Deploying mixed methods for community-based innovation (along the lines of a design hackathon), human-centred design consultation and quantitative data analysis, Singapore-based social enterprise company, Syinc take an approach to behaviour change which is informed both by the behavioural insights afforded by psycho-social analysis, a broad understanding of the (social) systems which form the backdrop of behaviours, and a stated commitment to social change. Their Under the Hood project, a civic engagement project aimed at tackling urban poverty takes a localised approach to develop creative solutions. This involves spending extended amounts of time developing emotional connections and trust in communities, listening to diverse viewpoints, ethnographic observations and paying attention to the way in which people narrate and interpret their own lives.

<http://syinc.org/>

Ethical considerations

- What kinds of evidence are being used to justify the behavioural intervention?
- Does this evidence tell the whole story?
- Can proof of 'what works' really be transferred to other contexts?
- What is the basis for 'success' for the intervention, and who has been involved in determining this?
- Can the effects of the intervention be isolated, and cause and effect identified?
- Is scientific evidence a sufficient justification for policy?



“There is a danger that the current UK government’s interest in RCTs is driven not by their methodological suitability, but because they lend themselves to a model of governance that values context-free quantification and benchmarking.”

Warren Pearce and Sujatha Raman (2014: 398)

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