How should we think about public acceptability as behaviour-change practitioners?

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We are a social purpose company

At the intersection of...

World’s first governmental organisation using behavioural insights to improve lives. We’re now a leading independent global consultancy.

Achieving impact by understanding behaviour and testing interventions to improve products, campaigns, policy and services.
Designing policy, services and campaigns to support pro-environmental behaviour
Some important questions

1. Why might we want to influence behaviour?

1. What do we actually want, anyway?

1. What does this mean for how we think about public acceptance?
Why might we want to influence behaviour? And does the level of ‘permission’ vary?

**Because it benefits them**
E.g. discouraging consumption of unhealthy food; age requirements on tattoos, gambling

**Because it benefits us**
E.g. selling more product; eliciting votes

**Because it benefits someone else / society**
E.g. tackling fraud & corruption; encouraging volunteering; green behaviours

**More than one of the above**
E.g. smoking in public places; social distancing.

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**Paternalistic**
- A restriction to one’s freedom for one’s own good

- Lots of evidence this is true (present bias, hot/cold states etc.)
- But still, valid criticisms of nanny-state, infantilising, and difficulty of knowing what’s ‘best’ for others.

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**Not paternalistic**
- About protecting vulnerable, or whole-of-society, from harm
- Hard to argue we have the right to commit harm (or that others have the right to harm us!)
- Most environmental behaviour change is justified on this basis. (Pro-social, rather than pro-self)
But this doesn’t win us over. Pro-self intervention generally more acceptable than pro-social

**Paternalistic policy**
(restricting our choice for our own benefits, e.g. sugar tax)

**Philosophically debatable**
(brings benefits, but infantilising and presumptuous)

**Yet… support often higher** (because it does benefit us. And we sometimes want a nudge to act on our intentions)

**non-paternalistic policy**
(restricting our choice to stop us harming others, or from others harming us)

**Philosophically defensible**
(no one has the right to harm others)

**Yet… support often lower** Though it depends:
- If it restricts our freedom (to cause harm) 😞
- If it restricts others’ freedom (to harm us) 😊

We’re good at rationalising our support, but a lot of it comes down to self-interest
So what?

1. **Framing matters.** Many policies can be justified on multiple grounds (e.g. health and environmental and economic)

Which Reasons to Transition to Renewable Energy
Do Republicans and Democrats Think Are Most Important?

- **Reduce energy costs**
- **Get energy from sources that never run out**
- **Reduce water pollution**
- **Increase America’s energy independence**
- **Provide a better life for our children and grandchildren**
- **Reduce air pollution**
- **Improve people’s health**
- **Create jobs and a stronger economy**
- **Make energy costs more stable**
- **Save plant/animal species from extinction**
- **Protect God’s creation**
- **Protect communities harmed by fossil fuels**
- **Reduce military costs of energy access**
- **Reduce influence of fossil fuel industry**
- **Make the U.S. a global energy leader**
- **Reduce global warming**

What do we actually want, anyway?
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Our preferences are complex, and far from ‘sovereign’

Where do preferences come from?
- They’re more a product (of context, economic, social, material, media forces), than an endogenous, innate, or immutable characteristic.

Are they consistent?
- No!
- We have short-term preferences and long-term preferences.
- We have first-order preferences (wants) and second-order preferences (want to wants)
- Further skewed by biases (e.g. loss aversion, status-quo bias)

How do we even know what they are?
- Revealed preferences (what we do) are a poor proxy for true preferences.
- Self-reported preferences (what we say) can be better, IF asked properly, well-informed, and thoughtful.
Our preferences are complex, dynamic, and far from ‘sovereign’
So what?

1. **Framing matters.** Many policies can be justified on multiple grounds (e.g. health and environmental and economic)

2. **Behaviour-change often comes first,** so don’t be too fixated on whether current attitudes ‘permit’ intervention (within reason). Legitimate changes to the context (through policy or intervention, e.g. taxes, new technologies, social norms) will **lead to** new preferences.

3. **Help people help themselves.** We often already have ‘second order’ preferences (to be healthier, live in a more more sustainable) - even though, in the world as it currently is, we fail to live up to them and our short-term preferences prevail (driving is convenient, flying is cheap etc.). So...
   
   i.) pay more attention to those aspirations (even though some may not immediately thank you), and
   
   ii) help people close that intention-action gap (remove frictions, increase choice, incentivise), rather than restrict /penalise / admonish)

1. **Maintain liberty.** Nudges can be effective, and choice doesn’t always need to be restricted.

2. **Highlight the benefits of policy,** and their **effectiveness.** Research shows both to boost support. Particularly where status-quo is strong, and the losses may be more familiar than gains.

3. **Make policy with the public.** Citizen assemblies & public dialogues really work - they create a mandate, bring fresh ideas, and people are more than capable of making difficult choices.
Thank you
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