



How is the UK government promoting sustainable behaviour?

The UK government has made a number of attempts to develop an understanding of British pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours. For example, there have been periodic surveys of public perceptions of climate change and sustainable behaviours conducted by the Department for Transport (e.g., DfT, 2010), while Defra (the Department for Farming and Rural Affairs) has developed a 'framework for sustainable behaviours' which identifies different 'segments' of the population based on their attitudes and behaviours.

More recently, Defra has produced a strategy for influencing sustainable behaviours based on this framework. The Defra and Department for Transport documents are worth reading, to get a sense of how the government of an industrialised nation is thinking about how to influence their citizens' behaviour. However, probably the most significant work that the UK government has produced comes from the Cabinet Office, which contains a group known as the Behavioural Insight Team.

The Behavioural Insight Team was announced in 2010 to provide an evidence base for government programmes that aimed to influence individual behaviour. Governments are often reluctant to openly attempt to influence people's values, and the Behavioural Insight Team draws heavily on work by two behavioural economists (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008), which is seen as offering a 'value-neutral' approach to behavioural change.

Often referred to colloquially as the 'Nudge' team (after the title of Thaler & Sunstein's book), the focus of the 'Nudge' approach is on shaping the context in which decisions are made, rather than explicitly aiming to persuade or dissuade people from engaging in a particular behaviour (Involve/DEA, 2010). Thaler and Sunstein describe their approach as focusing on 'decision architecture', but it shares a great deal of common ground with the principles of social marketing – the systematic application of marketing concepts and techniques to achieve specific behavioural goals relevant to the social good.

There are two reports that show most clearly how the UK government is seeking to influence sustainable behaviours. The first introduces an approach called 'MINDSPACE' (Dolan et al, 2010), which is an acronym for the nine principles that the Cabinet Office considers to be critical for influencing individual behaviour. The nine principles are: Messenger (people are heavily influenced by who communicates information); Incentives (our responses to incentives are shaped by 'heuristics' such as strongly avoiding losses); Norms (we are strongly influenced by what others do); Defaults (we 'go with the flow' of pre-set options); Salience (our attention is drawn to what is novel and seems relevant to us); Priming (our acts are often influenced by sub-conscious cues); Affect (our emotional associations can powerfully shape our actions); Commitments (we seek to be consistent with our public promises, and reciprocate acts) and Ego (we act in ways that make us feel better about ourselves).

These nine principles are designed to be applicable to a range of domains – not just sustainable behaviours. Although the nine principles remain within the boundaries of social marketing – the limitations of which are discussed here – the MINDSPACE approach is quite a sophisticated and evidence-based strategy for impacting sustainable behaviours.

Using these principles, the Behavioural Insight Team produced a report looking specifically at household energy behaviours, and has applied a wide range of behavioural economic evidence to the design of the 'Green Deal' – a flagship policy aimed at improving the energy efficiency of up to 14 million homes in the UK. For example, drawing on the 'Incentives' principle, low-interest loans are being offered to households to remove the barrier of paying 'up-front' for things like home insulation. And in collaboration with the energy company Opower, information about neighbours' energy usage will be made available on people's energy bills (based on the 'Social Norms' principle).

REFERENCES

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