

Behaviour Change Tools: Soft versus Hard Options

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Introduction

The need for individual and population-based behaviour change is evident across a range of sectors. We examine behaviour change strategies, contrasting aspects of health and lifestyle factors with climate change and sustainability issues and note that different policy makers favour specific behaviour change tools; some favour ‘hard’ options i.e. legislation and others ‘soft’ options such as persuasion. Different strategies will be more effective for specific issues and population segments - and combinations of strategies should not be ruled out.

Contrasting Health and Lifestyle with Climate Change and Sustainability

Preventable illness was estimated in 2006 to cost the English economy £187 billion, 19% of gross domestic product (National Social Marketing Centre, 2006). Over 1 million deaths per annum in the USA are attributable to lifestyle and environmental factors (Rothschild, 1999). Seven of the ten leading causes of USA death could be substantially reduced by improving these factors (Petty & Caccioppo, 1996). Climate change and sustainability are more complex than many ‘single issues’. There is widespread (not universal) agreement that sustainability and climate change are major issues facing society (Peattie & Peattie, 2009) and continued pursuit of economic growth based on exploitation of finite resources is unsustainable (Burroughs, 2010). Human activity has disrupted many ecological systems on which people depend but while lifestyle changes are mooted, there is neither recognition nor clear communication of what action should be taken and by whom (Gowdy, 2008). Assumption of “spillover effects” i.e. small changes are catalysts for wider changes, lack evidence and engaging in one pro-environmental behaviour, may be seen to have compensated for other environmentally detrimental behaviours (Corner & Randall, 2011).

Behaviour Change Tools

Change strategy options centre on legislation, education and an array of persuasive strategies (Rothschild, 1999). Strategic considerations include who defines desired behaviour, what evidence justifies intervention (Wolf, 2007), whether harm to others may arise (Guttman & Salmon, 2004) and what risk levels are acceptable (Callahan & Jennings, 2002). Government’s role in balancing restrictions out of ‘paternalistic’ concern versus individual freedoms is not simple, particularly when increased health risks arise from personal choices, but medical care costs and indirect costs are borne by the wider society, (Gostin, 2007). Climate change adaptation and pro-environmental behaviour present more complex challenges in terms of governmental versus individual actions. Legislation has been used in a number of areas, but preference is for less ‘hard’ (and unpopular) options such as persuasion (Haw & Gruer, 2007).

Information Only

Information-based interventions are effective when individual self interest is strong and consistent with societal goals (Rothschild, 1999). However, “if information was all that was needed to change behaviour, cigarette smoking would have declined drastically in the mid-1960s and be nonexistent today” (Schneider, 2006: 812). Unintended effects also occur (Cho & Salmon, 2007). In energy, ‘rebound’ occurs, e.g. users of energy-efficient appliances use them more often and fail to reduce overall energy usage (Abrahamse et al., 2005). Lack of knowledge (i.e. ‘information deficit’) is cited as causing misconceptions, apathy and impeding attitude change and thus behavioural change (Costello et al., 2009); the gap between attitudes and behaviours is well documented. Attitude change alone is unlikely to achieve sustained behaviour change; focus on voluntary change ignores social, environmental and institutional barriers. Change, or lack of it, may be driven by factors such as financial constraints or the perception that changing one’s own behaviour will not make any difference

to the impact of climate change (Semenza et al., 2008). The failure of the ‘information deficit’ model to recognise complex interactions of factors in achieving (or not achieving) successful and sustained behaviour change is also documented, together with the inadequacies of many current theories in capturing and charting the interaction of these factors across different population groups (see, for example, Lorenzoni et al., 2007). Further work is needed in this area to strengthen and extend theoretical foundations underpinning behaviour change options

Communication of climate change science has been criticised, with the suggestion that current strategies result in “islands of knowledge in a sea of ignorance” (Meinke et al, 2006: 101); there is a need for salience, legitimacy and credibility to be considered in communicating climate change science. Other factors that hinder comprehension for those who lack scientific knowledge include: the invisibility of climate change causes, a tendency to discount the impact of distant events, lack of immediacy, disbelief about the impact of people and the efficacy of any individual action, uncertainty, perceptual limits and self-interest (Moser, 2010). Education or simple information provision is therefore necessary, but not in and of itself sufficient to change behaviours. Other options are therefore needed.

Persuasion: Behavioural Economics

Failures of individuals and social groups to act in purely rational ways, and the predictability of this ‘irrational’ behaviour has long been recognised (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Behavioural economics (BE) differs from traditional economics in that it recognises individual cognitive limitations, tendencies to make behavioural choices out of habit rather than deliberation. BE received increased focus with the release of a US text (Thaler & Sustein, 2008) which advocates a range of non-legislative ‘nudge’ interventions that alter the contexts (‘choice architecture’) in which behaviour occurs. Nudges work best on unintentional/automatic behaviours but do not impact on knowledge, attitudes and values and are difficult to maintain long term (Avineri & Goodwin, 2010). There is conflict between the assumptions of choice architecture and commercial profit imperatives (Lira et al., 2004). Nudges towards what experts judge desirable (Sugden, 2009) may be contested; what may be a ‘nudge’ to the originators may be perceived as a ‘shove’ by recipients (Marteau et al., 2009) – and the media. This may also lead to reactance effects, where engaging in the threatened behaviour is one means of re-establishing freedom (Rummel et al., 2000). Awareness of nudge attempts may result in the behaviour itself becoming more attractive – the ‘forbidden fruit’ problem (Sussman et al., 2010).

Choice of Behaviour Change Tools

The influence of the Thaler & Sustein text has been far reaching, with a Behavioural Insights Team (commonly referred to as the ‘Nudge’ unit established within the UK Cabinet Office (Corner & Randall, 2011). However, a surprising critique of the Nudge approach as applied to the UK government policy sector comes from a recent House of Lords report (Science & Technology Committee, 2011). Consistent with a plea for research to investigate “*what works, for whom, in what circumstances and for how long*” (Marteau et al., 2011: 264), the House of Lords report recommended “*applied research at a population level*” in order to increase understanding of behaviour change interventions and criticised the use of non-regulatory tactics such as Nudge in isolation. We argue that Marteau’s comment also applies to the role of social marketing relative to other intervention strategies, with a need for critical evaluation of, and integrated research into, the relevance and power of behaviour change theories.

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