

UK Technocrats Sharpen the Knives of Manipulation

BY  GARY SIDLEY JUNE 23, 2024 ECONOMICS, GOVERNMENT, PSYCHOLOGY 10 MINUTE READ

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My recently published research into the UK Government's deployment of behavioural science strategies – '[nudges](#)' – leads to a startling conclusion: in every sphere of daily life, our thoughts and actions are being psychologically manipulated so as to align them with what the state's technocrats have deemed to be in our best interests. It seems that open, transparent debate is no longer considered necessary.

How did my nation, a purported beacon of freedom and democracy, descend to such a position? While there have been multiple participants in this journey into behavioural science-fueled authoritarianism, a historical review of the key players indicates that American scholars have contributed in crucial ways to this trajectory.

The Ubiquity of UK Behavioural Science

The research to which I refer sought to reveal the actors responsible for strategically frightening and shaming the British people during the Covid event. Focusing on the controversial 'Look them in the eyes' messaging campaign – involving a series of close-up [images](#) of patients on the cusp of death and a voice-over saying, '*Look them in the eyes and tell them you are doing all you can to stop the spread of coronavirus*' – my critical analysis uncovered a series of disturbing findings in regard to the UK government's deployment of often-covert behavioural science strategies during times of 'crisis.' These revelations included:

1. State-sponsored nudging is ubiquitous in the UK, seeping into almost every aspect of day-to-day life. Whether responding to a health challenge, using public transport, watching a TV drama, or interacting with the tax office, our minds are being psychologically manipulated by state-funded technocrats.
2. The rapid expansion of UK behavioural science has not occurred by chance; it has been a strategic goal. For example, a 2018 [document](#) by Public Health England (the forerunner to the UK Health Security Agency) announced that ‘*The behavioural and social sciences are the future of public health,*’ and one of their priority goals was to make the skills of these disciplines ‘*mainstream in all our organisations.*’
3. Throughout the Covid event, UK government communications – as guided by their behavioural science advisors – routinely resorted to fear inflation, shaming, and scapegoating (‘affect,’ ‘ego,’ and ‘normative pressure’ [nudges](#)) to lever compliance with restrictions and the subsequent vaccine rollout.
4. The UK government’s bar for legitimising the terrorising of its own people has been set incredibly low. For instance, one official [justification](#) for inflicting further fear inflation onto an already scared population was that, in January 2021, the populace was not as frightened as at the start of the Covid event in March 2020: ‘*Fearful but much less panic this time around.*’

As things currently stand, the UK Government can draw on several providers of behavioural science expertise to sharpen their official communications with the British public. In addition to the multiple nudgers embedded in transient pandemic advisory groups, since 2010 our policymakers have been guided by ‘*The world’s first government institution dedicated to the application of behavioural science to policy:*’ the [Behavioural Insight Team](#) (BIT) – informally referred to as the ‘Nudge Unit.’

Conceived in the Cabinet Office of the then Prime Minister David Cameron, and led by the prominent behavioural scientist Professor David Halpern, the BIT functioned as a blueprint for other nations, rapidly expanding into a ‘*social purpose company*’ operating in many countries around the world (including the US). Further behavioural science input to the UK government is routinely provided by in-house departmental personnel – for instance, [24](#) nudgers in the UK Health Security Agency, [54](#) in the Tax Office, and [6](#) in the Department of Transport – and via the [Government Communication Service](#), that comprises ‘*over 7,000 professional communicators*’ and incorporates its own ‘Behavioural Science Team’ located in the Cabinet Office.

The Early Contribution of US Scholars

How did the UK evolve into a nation saturated with state-funded behavioural scientists whose *raison d'être* is to facilitate the government's top-down control of its citizens? Two evolutionary strands that have led to the British administration drawing so heavily on the advice of behavioural scientists are the psychological paradigm of 'behaviourism' and the emergence of the discipline of 'behavioural economics.' And US scholars have played a leading role within each.

In some respects, modern-day behavioural science can be construed as a derivative of the psychological school of behaviourism that gained prominence over a century ago with the work of American psychologist, [John B. Watson](#). A rejection of the previously dominant introspectionist movement (whose focus was subjectivity and inner consciousness), Watson viewed the main goal of psychology to be the 'prediction and control of behaviour.' The paradigm of behaviourism concentrated exclusively on observables: the environmental stimuli that make a particular behaviour more or less likely, the overt behaviour itself, and the consequences of that behaviour (referred to as 'reinforcement' or 'punishment').

The theoretical underpinnings of behaviourism comprise *classical conditioning* (learning by association) and *operant conditioning* (learning by consequence), all behaviour being assumed to derive from a combination of these two mechanisms. Subsequently, another American psychologist, [B.F. Skinner](#), refined the approach; his 'radical behaviourism' resulting in strategic regulation of environmental stimuli and reinforcement being the prominent approach to the psychological treatment of phobias and other clinical problems throughout the 1960s and 1970s (albeit less so today). Elements of this pioneering work of Watson and Skinner can be observed in contemporary behavioural science, in its reliance on a range of strategies – nudges – to shape people's behaviour by strategically changing environmental triggers and the consequences of our actions.

Another, perhaps more influential, historical influence on the nature of contemporary behavioural science arose from the academic discipline of economics. As detailed by [Jones et al \(2013\)](#), in the 1940s the 'standard economic model' held the basic assumption that human beings were rational in their motivation and decision-making and that each could be relied upon to routinely make choices that advantaged their financial circumstances.

This notion of rationality was first challenged by an American economist, [Herbert Simon](#), in his assertion that the capacity of the human mind to make self-serving economic decisions was very limited. More specifically, Simon argued that human beings typically fail to utilise all the available information – a phenomenon he termed 'bounded rationality' – as well as

favouring both short-term gratification over future planning and an unhelpful reliance upon arbitrarily established habits of behaviour. Importantly, Simon raised the spectre of these irrationalities being effectively countered within social organisations, thereby ultimately giving legitimacy to nation-state intervention in the decision-making processes of its citizens; the seed of the Governments-know-what's-best-for-us assumption was sown.

Simon also legitimised the study of human irrationality as a focus of academic inquiry in its own right, thereby establishing common ground between the disciplines of economics and psychology. And, in subsequent decades, a succession of American social scientists took the baton and provided further elucidation of the nature of the biases that underpinned human decision-making.

Tversky, Kahneman, Cialdini, Thaler, and Sunstein

In the 1970s, two prominent figures in the 'new behavioural economics' movement were Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, Israeli-born psychologists working in American universities. Their major contribution to this emerging field was to elucidate the heuristics (shortcuts) that humans deploy when making snap judgements, one component of the flawed cognitive processing that underpins bounded rationality. One such imperfect rule of thumb is the 'representativeness heuristic' which may, for example, lead an observer to conclude that an introverted and tidy person is more likely to be a librarian than a salesman, when – given the relative prevalence of these two professions – the opposite is, statistically, far more likely.

In the following decade, Robert Cialdini (a psychology professor at Arizona University) provided further insights into the automatic – 'fast brain' – workings of the human mind. Focusing on the methods of compliance professionals, Cialdini described how key features of a person's social environment can predictably trigger responses that are independent of deliberative thought or reflection.

In his acclaimed book, *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, (first published in 1984), he lists seven principles routinely deployed by sales personnel to encourage customers to buy. For instance, 'social proof' exploits the inherent human tendency to follow the crowd, to do what we believe most others are doing; informing a potential buyer that a particular item has been flying off the shelves will increase the likelihood of another sale. (The same strategy was deployed during the Covid event, with public health announcements such as 'the large

majority of people are following the lockdown rules' and '90% of the adult population have already been vaccinated'.)

Cialdini's pioneering work encouraged a more generalised employment of these often-covert techniques of persuasion in both the private and public sectors. However, two other American scholars were centrally responsible for installing the tools of behavioural science into the political sphere of nation-states, including the UK.

In 2008, Richard Thaler (an economics professor) and Cass Sunstein (a law professor) – both based at the University of Chicago – wrote a book that facilitated the mainstreaming of behavioural science strategies. Influenced by the work of Tversky, Kahneman and Cialdini, the book – *'Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth and Happiness'* – operationalised the use of nudges by state actors under the seductive banner of 'libertarian paternalism.'

The thrust of their argument was that behavioural science strategies could be used to mould the 'choice architecture' so as to make it more likely that people act in ways that enhance their long-term welfare, without resorting to coercion or the removal of options. One fundamental, and highly dubious, assumption underpinning this approach is that government officials and their expert advisors always know what is in the best interests of their citizens.

Although the concept of libertarian paternalism is an oxymoron, the construing of nudges in this way allowed the approach to achieve acceptability across the political spectrum, the 'libertarian' banner chiming with the right, the 'paternalism' banner with the left. Furthermore, Thaler proactively promoted state-funded behavioural science in the UK – for example, in 2008 he met with David Cameron (the then leader of the Conservative Party) and effectively became his unpaid advisor; it is no coincidence that, in the same year, future Prime Minister Cameron included Thaler and Sunstein's book as required reading for his political team during their summer vacation.

Meanwhile, Labour – the UK's main left-of-centre political party – had been hatching their own plans for the deployment of behavioural science, with David Halpern (the chief of the current UK Behavioural Insight Team) a prominent figure. Thus, in the role of Chief Analyst in Labour's 'Cabinet Office Strategy Unit,' Halpern was the lead author of a 2004 document titled, *'Personal Responsibility and Changing Behaviour: The State of Knowledge and Its Implications for Public Policy.'* In this publication, he provides a detailed review of the work of Tversky, Kahneman, Thaler, and Sunstein, and explores how knowledge of human

heuristics and cognitive biases could be incorporated into the design of government policy. Throughout the first decade of the 21st century, Halpern provided a useful conduit between the emergence of state-funded nudging in the UK and the behavioural science pioneers in the US.

This journey towards the present-day scenario of government's ubiquitous deployment of behavioural science accelerated with the release of the [MINDSPACE](#) document in 2010. Co-authored by Halpern, this publication provided an explicit practical framework of how these methods of persuasion could be applied to public policy. From this point, behavioural science was construed as an essential component of UK government communications.

The Aftermath

The influential work of the above-mentioned US scholars, together with a series of UK political leaders ideologically wedded to technocracy and top-down control of the populace, has had important consequences for British society. The tools of behavioural science are now embedded within the UK Government's communication infrastructure – alongside other [non-consensual methods of persuasion](#) and [propaganda](#) – collectively constituting a potent armoury for manipulating the beliefs and behaviours of ordinary people. Currently, whenever the political elite choose to announce a 'crisis,' our leaders (aided and abetted by their chosen 'experts') are happy to covertly shape citizens' behaviour in line with their (often dubious) goals, routinely deploying methods that rely on fear, shame, and scapegoating.

My hope is that this brief overview of how the UK reached its current position of ubiquitous state-sponsored manipulation of the masses will help ordinary people to reflect on the appropriateness and acceptability of this form of government persuasion. Is the fact that humans can often act in irrational and (apparently) counterproductive ways sufficient justification for technocrats to strive to shape our day-to-day beliefs and behaviours so as to align them with what they believe to be the 'greater good?' Is it ethically sound for our political elite to strategically inflict emotional discomfort on the populace as a means of encouraging the populace to adhere to their diktats? Contemplation of these, and similar, questions by people residing in once-liberal democracies may lead to more visible dissent, with escalating numbers opting to reclaim their basic human right of deliberative decision-making. I certainly hope so.