Position Paper

The importance of behavioural science research in addressing the UN sustainable development goals for climate action and reduced inequality

Introduction:

"Behaviour change on a global scale is instrumental to achieving the SDGs" (Mar Dieye, 2018). Over the last decade, governments started acknowledging the potential benefits of behavioural science in developing policies (Bolton & Newell, 2017). Therefore, several countries such as the UK, the US, Germany, and Australia have implemented Behavioural Insights or Nudge units to improve policy development (Hallsworth et al., 2018). Behavioural insights deepen governments' insights into the mechanisms and factors influencing human behaviour (OECD, 2022). Indeed, behavioural science may help improve governments' decision-making in a high-level political forum from two perspectives.

Firstly, common models used for policymaking expect people to respond rationally, although some policies may present unforeseen consequences (Hallsworth et al., 2018). If a policy entails highly significant changes in people's behaviours, one suggests reshaping such policy around the behaviour instead of trying to modify or suppress it. Secondly, governments' actions and decisions may be biased or unjustified (Hallsworth et al., 2018). Interestingly, previous research highlighted that 80% of the states accepted the treaty adjudication by the International Court of Justice when it was the default option. Nevertheless, only 5% selected it when the country had to actively choose it (Hallsworth et al., 2018).

Furthermore, various intergovernmental organizations started working on projects centred on behavioural insights. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) pioneered applying behavioural science to public policy (OECD, 2022). The organization presented the first open-source framework developed by behavioural insights experts and policymakers as a guiding tool: the Tools and Ethics for Applied Behavioral Insights – the BASIC Toolkit. The OECD also published 150 case studies regarding behavioural insights applied to public policy (Hallsworth et al., 2018). Additionally, the European Commission, the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) started focusing on behavioural science and investing in applying its findings to program design and policy formulation (Mar Dieye, 2018). The UNDP partnered with the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Women and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) to organize the first 'UN Behavioral Insights Day' during the High-Level Political Forum.

Such behavioural insights also foster progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) regarding climate action and inequality. Indeed, behavioural sciences were used in the first studies regarding climate change (Fischhoff, 2021). Nevertheless, public discourses and policies started evolving in the ensuing quarter century without integrating behavioural insights. Still, behavioural science may benefit climate action by translating behavioural results into quantitative estimates and making climate research more relevant for climate-related decisions (Fischhoff, 2021; United Nations, 2022). Furthermore, the International Trading Center of the International Labor Organization (ITC-ILO) developed a Learning Innovation Program Unit to organize capacity-building initiatives to enhance behavioural science's accessibility to the organization's members (MacLennan & Jochim, 2018). Interestingly, one of their key projects is centred on the use of behavioural insights to address inequalities related to gender and employment policies (United Nations, 2022).

Psychological and behavioural science can help people think differently about the future and how to live and run society more sustainably. Public support needs to be gained if a radical change in society's structure is to be achieved, and psychological and behavioural science can help achieve that. As aforementioned, there is an increased use of psychological and behavioural science in significant institutional problems. This could help reframe social problems more sustainably, and this is where the value of the Psychological and Behavioral Science (PBS) department in achieving the SDGs lies.

PBS Department's recent research on climate action

The PBS department can observe the resistance to climate action and encourage behaviour that can help people feel more empowered to change their behaviour. The PBS department's recent research has focused on eating vegan or vegetarian instead of meat dishes. Diet has been shown to have a significant environmental impact. Meat and dairy consumption, for example, has been shown to account for 14.5% of worldwide greenhouse gas emissions (Gerber et al., 2013). Therefore, individual-level dietary changes can be instrumental in tackling climate change. The PBS department has focused on several behavioural insights and techniques to understand why people are making the dietary choices they are. An example of this is understanding the influence of anthropomorphism in fostering feelings of guilt in meat-eating (Wang & Basso, 2020). Understanding the emotions elicited by certain behaviours is essential when looking at how to change behaviour to be more sustainable. Drawing on these understandings, the department has also examined the influence of several behavioural science techniques on encouraging people to make more sustainable dietary choices. The research includes looking at whether the benefits of vegetarianism should be framed in a personal or planetary way or a combination of the two (Shreedhar & Galizzi, 2021), the effectiveness of different restaurant menus in nudging pro-environmental food choices (Bacon & Krpan, 2018) and on how to frame the labels of vegetarianism.

This could include using a social frame, for example linking vegetarian foods to a social experience instead of dining, or an environmental frame where the environmental benefits of vegetarian foods are highlighted (Krpan & Houtsma, 2020).

These behavioural techniques, if implemented successfully, have the potential to be significantly influential in encouraging people to eat more sustainably, shifting away from meat consumption. Of course, to make change happen, we need to look beyond just changing individual behaviour. Chater & Loewenstein (2022) warned against the trend amongst behavioural scientists to view i-frame (individual-focused) solutions as alternatives to system change. System change, including legislation and social norms, should also be implemented to progress towards achieving the SDGs. Critically, there is a limit to what one can achieve by changing individual behaviour in isolation.

PBS Department's recent research on inequalities

Research by the PBS department has looked at several factors of inequality with a particular focus on understanding inequality and processes of inequality. It is crucial to lay the foundation before deciding how to tackle inequalities; there must first be a consensus on what inequalities exist. This varies depending on ideology, and psychological and behavioural science can help understand said ideology. All the different perceptions make it harder for people to come together to address it. The first of these are reasons for inequality: why are ethnic minorities worse off at all levels of the education system? What factors moderate the attainment gap? (Frings, Gleibs & Ridley, 2019). To tackle inequalities, it is essential to understand how inequalities arise in the first place.

There has also been researching on differences between various social groups and individual differences in thinking about inequality, such as does people's group-based hierarchy orientation motivate the extent to which they think there is inequality between social groups? (Kteily, Sheehy-Skeffington & Ho, 2016). Or how does someone's low socioeconomic status affect their decision-making process? (Sheehy-Skeffington & Rea, 2017; Sheehy-Skeffington, 2019). How are the attitudes towards the unequal distribution of resources related to social relationships? (Sheehy-Skeffington & Thomsen, 2019). How does framing affect the way public attitudes are shaped towards the unemployed? (Okoroji, Gleibs & Jovchelovitch, 2020). These are all very relevant questions regarding understanding the complex processes at play in unequal societies. To take steps towards making societies more equal, knowing what kind of thinking is upholding the current social order and what processes and norms need to be changed is a good starting point. Only through understanding these issues can we begin developing effective interventions that tackle these problems.

Position:

As representatives of the PBS department at the London School of Economics, we posit the need for further resources on research and development in behavioural science to alleviate problems such as inequalities and climate change on both a local and global scale. Such implications include using behaviour science to examine various world dynamics, such as social groups or political and economic institutions and how they shape individual attitudes and behaviours. The PBS department provides insight into people's preferences and motivations and how to reframe their societal perspectives and behaviours for the greater good. The following sections highlight key research areas from the PBS discipline that may do so.

Behavioural research's implications on SDG 10: Reduced Inequalities:

1. **Measuring inequality:** Ideologies shape our perception of issues' prevalence, such as inequality, beyond economic indicators. Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington's research deepens our understanding of this issue and helps us mitigate it.
2. **SES's impact on decision-making and behaviour:** One looks forward to understanding how people's socioeconomic status affects their decision-making.

Behavioural research's implications on SDG 13: Climate Action:

1. **Individual level behavioural changes through nudging and behavioural change wheel:** Indeed, climate change is an intrinsically human-led problem.
2. **Reworking conceptions of sustainable change:** The planet's needs are rapidly evolving. PBS is examining how to change people's behaviour as for instance when moving away from consumeristic values towards more holistic, ecological lifestyles.
3. **Studying the interaction between environmental policy environments and behaviour:** There is a considerable focus on trust, information, challenging social norms, and the way people adapt to new technologies and education.

1499 words

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