The adult years of behavioural science



e are living through an era rapidly becoming known as a 'permacrisis', an unholy combination of crippling costs of living, supply chain constraints, pandemic aftermath, increase in chronic health problems and, lastly – and most critically – climate change emergency. We will need all the tools in the box to tackle these.

One ray of hope is that applied behavioural science is reaching its adult years, with greater ability to understand behaviour at both a meta and micro level, and, through this understanding, to influence and change behaviour.

There are three transitions behavioural science is making in its maturity.

Behaviour in context

There is increased recognition of the importance of a deep understanding of behaviour in context before leaping into action. In other words, it's not all about nudging.

As behavioural science has been scaled and applied in many different contexts, researchers have increasingly recognised

how critical it is to take time to gain a fully realised understanding of behaviour in a context, and in relation to the surrounding culture. Neela Saldanha, behavioural scientist and executive director at Yale University's Research Initiative on Innovation and Scale, notes the immense task of applied behavioural science in different contexts, and the importance of fully understanding cultural influences before designing any intervention. In an interview in the behavioural science issue of *Early Childhood Matters*, published by the Bernard van Leer Foundation in 2022, she said: "Behavioural interventions seem so simple when you read the books. The biggest lesson I learned was how hard it was to apply even simple interventions when they have not been tried out in a particular context. You have to understand the culture deeply before you can think about working towards behaviour-change solutions."

Not all interventions are equal

With greater insights gleaned from more fully realised research, we are increasingly able to embrace heterogeneity and to recognise that not all behavioural interventions (or nudges) are equal in impact. This helps to manage strategy and expectations of level of potential change.

We've learned that not all nudges are equal; different contexts and different concepts will yield different impacts on behaviour. A 'nudge' encompasses a multitude of very different concepts. Some, like defaults, can have powerful impacts, while others, typically, are more marginal.

Similarly, any impact, regardless of the concept, will vary depending on the context in which it is applied. For example, some contexts find that social-norms messages – informing

people of what the majority are doing – can change behaviour, while, in other contexts, such messages have no impact at all, and can even backfire.

Statistician and data scientist Beth Tipton and her colleagues recently outlined approaching such nuance with a positive frame,

rather than a negative one, asking: "What if instead of treating variation in intervention effects as a nuisance or a limitation on the impressiveness of an intervention, we assumed that intervention effects should be expected to vary across contexts and populations?"

This is a very different conclusion from some recent headlines about nudging, some of which imply that nudges have little or no impact. This is because the reviews on which the headlines are based have tried to calculate an average in a huge ocean of variation, mistakenly lumping all behavioural change initiatives together, regardless of how they differ. It's like trying to compare apples and pineapples. What is more helpful is breaking impacts down by different concept and looking at, and understanding, the variation in impact.



From micro to macro

Behavioural science is starting to tackle the big macro challenges as well as micro ones. In the early years, behavioural scientists looked for quick wins for proof of concept. For instance, the UK's Behavioural Insights Team was set up with a two-year sunset clause, which required them to achieve at least a tenfold rate of return on the cost of the team. In reality, it achieved more than £300m of gains by focusing on small, inexpensive changes that had significant impacts on decision-making and behaviour.

Part of what growing up is about, however, is realising that the power we have unlocked can also tackle bigger challenges, even the looming existential problems facing us. With the permacrisis intensifying, behavioural science is becoming an essential tool in any major organisation of the future - be it governments, global corporations or social activism - to help solve some of the biggest challenges of our generation. Several applied behavioural scientists, including Dan Ariely and Kelly Peters, have recently stepped up to face these challenges. Ariely wrote in his blog in December 2022: "I still think that social science has a large role to play in improving our personal lives, but I think that other important topics have emerged and many of these are more pressing. When I look at the world now, with the climate crisis, fake news and political fragmentation, my view is that our priorities should be different, and so is the role of social science.

"Over the past two decades or so, we have done a lot to get people to think about principles from social science in terms of our personal lives, and we now need to turn our attention to these larger challenges ahead of us."

Peters sold her consultancy, BEworks, to the Kyu Collective and has founded Trial Run, a product-innovation company to harness the power of behavioural science, with blockchain technologies to help companies drive their sustainability goals.

How to live in these adult years

- Appreciate and celebrate the breadth of behavioural science in its applicability to both the micro and the macro challenges we face; the small tweaks that make a frustrating consumer journey a satisfying one, to tackling the critical issues that people are facing today, such as complex health problems, living more sustainably, and, right now, coping with the cost-of-living crisis.
- Thoroughly research the context to understand what's driving current behaviour, recognising the roles of culture and emotion.
- There is no one size fits all. Look for, anticipate and enjoy variation in the impact of a behavioural intervention, then dig deeper and try to understand that variation.

¹ Bryan, C J, Tipton, E & Yeager, D S, 'Behavioural science is unlikely to change the world without a heterogeneity revolution', Nat Hum Behav 5, 980–989 (2021).