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Nudging Citizens Towards the ‘Big Society’?

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state**services** authority



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Gerry Stoker is Professor of Politics and Governance at the University of Southampton, UK. He is Director of the Centre for Citizenship, Globalisation and Governance (<http://www.soton.ac.uk/C2G2/>). Professor Stoker was the founding Chair of the New Local Government Network (www.nlgn.org.uk) that was the think tank of the year in the UK in 2004. He has acted as an advisor to the UK government and the Council of Europe on local government issues over the last decade and more. He has written extensively on the management, strategic direction, finance and organisation of local and regional government. He has authored or edited over 20 books and published over 80 refereed articles or chapters in books. His work has been translated into French, Spanish, Italian, Polish, Hebrew, Portuguese and Chinese. A recent book ‘Why Politics Matters’ won the 2006 political book of the year award from the Political Studies Association of the UK. His current research deals with issues of governance in complex settings, political disenchantment in western democracies, citizen empowerment and strategies for encouraging civic behaviour among citizens. In his research work Professor Stoker is committed to the use of pioneering methods and in particular to approaches that enable evidenced-based policy and practice. In recent work he has promoted the use of randomized control trials, design experiments and qualitative comparative “Boolean” techniques to draw out lessons from multiple case studies.

'Nudge' and the 'Big Society'

The 'Big Society' is a slogan used by the Conservative Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, David Cameron, to capture the idea that achieving positive outcomes in welfare policy is a task shared between government, citizens and communities. Recognising there is also an ideological dimension to this, the central idea of a Big Society emphasises the importance of one form of co-production: direct citizen involvement in the production of public services, whether in design, delivery or both (Ostrom 1996; Bovaird 2007; Alford 2009).

Policy-makers cannot command people to be more neighbourly, volunteer to help out in their community or make a contribution to tackling global warming by recycling more of what they use. They can provide financial incentives to support all of these activities, but fully substituting for civil society's efforts would require unsustainable levels of public spending. The idea of the Big Society implies a different, and more mutually inter-dependent, relationship between citizens and government.

The Big Society will require a major change in how we understand the micro-foundations of human behaviour, compared to command and control ideas about the state/citizen relationship (Dolan et al. 2010). This Occasional Paper looks first at the required change in thinking that is required, then moves on to identify new tools of intervention.

'Nudge' and Beyond

We need a sea change in the heuristics used by policy-makers, that is, in their shorthand understanding of human nature and human capacity. This message is at the heart of 'Nudge' by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein (2008, see also <http://nudges.org/>) which has been highly influential in the Anglo-Saxon world. From the Nudge perspective, policy-makers need to view citizens not as '*homo economicus*' but rather as '*homo sapiens*' – as 'Humans' rather than the 'Econs' offered by economists' (Thaler & Sunstein 2008, p. 7). The new view of human behaviour draws on cognitive science, psychology and behavioural economics and recognises people as less than perfect decision-makers driven by cognitive short-cuts and social norms and pressures. This paper argues that we must also focus on the *moral* as well as the psychological and behavioural dimensions of human decision-making.

As well as personal experience, significant social science research confirms that we are less than perfect decision-makers. Prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky 1979) alerts us to the 'endowment effect', which suggests that when we are already in possession of something, we are very reluctant to lose it. Cognitively, it is more important for us to hold onto what we have (i.e. prevent loss) than to gain something extra. Another facet of our cognitive architecture which displays our less than fully rational behaviour is our use of psychological discounting (Frederick et al. 2002). We place more weight on the short term than on the long term effects of our decisions. A closely related phenomenon is our propensity for maintaining the status quo (Samuelson & Zeckhauser 1988). Limited by time, intellectual energy and resources, the majority of us, most of the time, prefer not to change our habits unless we really have to. A fourth aspect of our behaviour, recognised by social psychologists and relevant to the development of Big Society, is the issue of cognitive consistency. Following Festinger (1957) psychologists suggest that people seek consistency between their beliefs and their behaviour. However, when beliefs and behaviour clash (the phenomenon of '*cognitive dissonance*'), we frequently alter our beliefs instead of adjusting our behaviour.

One way out of this difficulty, given a desire to promote Big Society, is to extract commitments from people (Dawnay & Shah 2005). Research indicates that when people make such a commitment, they feel more motivated to adjust their behaviour to back up their expressed beliefs, particularly where commitments are made in public. Evidence in the field of environmental behaviour suggests that extracting public promises can help to improve water

efficiency as compared to simple information provision (McKenzie-Mohr 2000). Similar findings are reported in the area of voting behaviour, with those asked beforehand to predict their likelihood of voting more likely to vote than those not asked (Greenwald et al. 1987), and in blood donation decisions where exposing people to an ‘active decision choice’ (i.e. actively putting the choice before them) increases blood donation rates in people who display uncertainty on the subject (Stutzer et al. 2006).

Social pressure more generally appears to make a big difference to our decision-making (see Halpern et al. 2004 for a review). For instance, our perception of how others see us, particularly our peers, matters to us. In the context of promoting energy efficiency within offices, there is evidence that the technique of ‘information disclosure’ between firms creates a ‘race to the top’ amongst firms keen to display their green credentials (Thaler & Sunstein 2008). Similarly, the concept of social proof suggests that when confronted with an ambiguous situation, we look to other people for cues on how to behave (Cialdini 2007). Additionally, we will be most influenced by people with whom we identify, those we trust and those who are seen as credible (Druckman 2001). Peer support and community mentoring schemes are examples of Big Society ideas which exploit these inter-personal influences, for instance programs to increase breast feeding which are delivered by mothers (Bovaird 2007), or bullying prevention schemes in schools where mentoring is provided by children who have suffered bullying (Cross et al. 2009).

Relationship between Nudging and morality

Although the literature on ‘nudging’ does not focus on it, there is also a lot of evidence to suggest that we are moral beings. Doing right matters to us.

Goodin (1982) identifies three forms of moral behaviour and motivation. The first is referred to as prudential morality and is premised on an appeal to long-term or enlightened self-interest, usually by way of careful reflection on the part of the individual. The second is where moral principles are held and internalised by the individual but are given the same status as more self-interested, instrumental motivations and are tradable in the prominence they are given in decision-making. The third area is where moral principles are held to be sacred and require to be protected from more profane motivations and not to be traded under any circumstances.

What happens to the moral dimension if we find that public policy levers such as financial incentives inadvertently transform altruistic orientations into self-interested loss and gain calculations? Goodin (1982, p. 112) notes there is a danger of ‘base motives driving out noble ones’ Goodin’s observations are echoed in Bruno Frey’s ‘Crowding Out’ theory (Frey & Jegen 2001) and supported by research. For instance, studies of volunteering indicate that volunteering rates can in some cases decline when payments are offered (Frey & Goette 1999). Similarly, in the field of childcare, the introduction of fines for parents who arrive late to pick up their children increases lateness because payment erodes their sense of guilt for being late and changes the nature of the relationship to a contractual one (Dawnay & Shah 2005).

New tools for intervention

The tool kit of government is likely to always involve regulation and incentives, but cognitive limitations, social pressures and moral concerns are also of importance. There are formidable obstacles to designing effective public policies fully cognisant of the complexity of human decision making. This Paper proposes four intervention points available to governments in translating broader ideas about “what makes humans tick” into deliverable policy measures to create coproduction (see Table 1).

1. *Framing*

Framing typically involves highlighting a subset of potentially relevant considerations which form part of the larger issue at stake, in order to influence the way in which people react to it (Druckman 2001). Framing activities are at the heart of many of the Nudge strategies. They are a widely recognised feature of marketing, campaign and policy interventions. Setting joining as the default choice, for example with respect to pensions, means that people have to make the effort to opt out and, in practice, more often take the social responsible option of saving for their future. Rapid and noticeable feedback over energy use in houses can cut consumption.

Framing refers to the process by which a policy maker may present an issue in order to encourage policy targets to respond in certain ways. The way problems are stated, and in particular the importance attached to certain dimensions of a problem, affect people’s reactions and their subsequent behaviour. It is an approach that is top-down, in which the decisions of citizens are framed or influenced by a policy format that takes citizens as they are but supports them towards better decisions. Framing recognises that as boundedly rational beings we do, at times, take cues from government and social peers, cues which act as rules of thumb to support individual decision-making.

There are clear constraints on the framing ability of elites. Experimental work (Druckman 2001) indicates that framers are only influential in proportion to their trustworthiness and credibility. Government agencies may not be trusted by citizens, constraining the capacity of interventions to change challenging behaviours. Trust in public institutions and agencies is a complex phenomenon (MORI 2003) and it cannot be assumed the trust needed to engage in effective framing will always be present. Initial research testing suggest that community organisation or voluntary bodies in combination with government are often the most likely to be effective framers because they are trusted by citizens, an idea already demonstrated by voluntary organisations proving to be better at getting people to recycle more in general, particularly food waste (John et al. 2011).

2. *Persuasion*

Persuasion shares some ground with the idea of framing, although the two are conceptually distinct. Persuasion involves altering *belief content* while framing involves only altering the relative *importance* that is attached to certain beliefs (Druckman 2001). What are the prospects of going beyond framing to persuasion? Lau et al. (1991) demonstrate that where only one interpretation of a policy problem and solution is presented, providing the idea itself is consistent with citizens’ cognitive schemata and the interpretation is itself a ‘chronically accessible construct’ (i.e. that the interpretation is largely uncontroversial and citizens are used to thinking about the policy problem in this way), they will generally accept the policy argument. In such situations, citizens engage in only ‘shallow information processing’. Their evaluation of the issue will be strongly influenced by the interpretation presented in the official account, even if this interpretation is at odds with their deeper political beliefs. However, where competing interpretations are presented and where interpretations might be in conflict with our cognitive schemata because the ideas themselves are new or unfamiliar, deeper information processing is required. In these situations, citizens tend to draw on their general political beliefs as a

heuristic to aid decision-making, rather than on rules of thumb or nudges provided by policy-makers.

In short, persuasion as an intervention point has its greatest impact when there is limited competition for ideas and little to challenge the message. It only takes a moment's reflection on the issue of global warming or the various controversies over immunisation and water recycling to see that the persuasion capacity of policy-makers can be limited in those circumstances when competing ideas are aired effectively.

3. Norm-making

Fostering social norms which support co-production and citizen participation is critical if the Big Society is to have a moral as well as instrumental dimension. Norms are shared expectations of what is taken to be appropriate in particular situations – they are part of the scaffolding of society (Anderson 2009). By definition, social norms develop in an incremental and evolutionary way through a process of repeated interaction between groups, making them difficult for policy makers to direct or influence. Moreover, social norms take time to translate into action.

Recognising the role of norm-making as an intervention point in shifting behaviour may make sense in terms of research, but there were few instances of translation into effective policy (as Putnam has found in relation to social capital; see Putnam & Feldstein 2003). Yet as Anderson notes (2009, p. 20) ‘there are also possibilities for institutional design and for taking measures to shore up, revise, or even create new social norms’.

However uncomfortable it is, government needs to cede power to citizens if the forces of norm-making are to come to fruition. Elinor Ostrom notes that ‘contrary to purely rational models, individuals systematically engage in collective action to provide local public goods or to manage common pool resources without external authority’ (Ostrom 1998, p. 2). With repeated interactions, particularly face-to-face, group members learn conditional cooperation and reciprocity, and develop norms of cooperation through the use of group sanctions and rewards, either material or reputational.

What is needed are strategies that give citizens more sustained space and opportunity to find common ground, deliberate their way to solutions and agree upon ways of changing behaviour (John et al. 2009). To realise the full range of intervention points available to foster co-production, we may need governments prepared to devolve more power to citizens than is achieved by adopting calculating Nudges. *The future of public services may be tied more to the capacity of government agencies to engage citizens individually and collectively in rethinking their lives and choices, than their ability to devise smarter Nudges.*

4. Norm selection

Policy-makers may need to concern themselves with the multiple norms already in operation in everyday settings. How can the state influence the process of norm selection? Lévi-Strauss (1966) uses the metaphor of bricolage to capture the way social actors learn in an *ad hoc* way, making sense of things as they go along and finding out what is useful. These localised processes of understanding and acting are inherently difficult for government to engage with, often leading to the failure of grand social engineering projects (Scott 1998). Scott argues these failures are in part a reflection of the high-handed, uniform, centralising and codifying form of thinking that can dominate government approaches, thus demonstrating a lack of respect for citizens’ local knowledge, as well as craft understanding and diversity of practices and perspectives.

The significance of local knowledge and localised behaviours suggests that the state faces a major intelligence challenge in developing more subtle and effective intervention. A capacity to see like a citizen rather than like a state is a considerable challenge for the effective development of new tools of intervention, but it is a critical component of being able to

understand what is likely to motivate citizens to co-produce. One key intervention point could be to use focus groups and the collective equivalent of a ‘mystery shopper’ to discover what it like to experience the state from the citizen’s viewpoint, and to use these insights to help inform strategies for encouraging co-production.

Table 1: Soft tools of intervention to facilitate behavioural change

Intervention Tool	Defining Characteristics	Process of Creation	Demands of Government	Limits to Government Capacity
Framing	Shaping the choice framework of actors based on their original values	Top-down	Presentation of multiple framing opportunities and a well-established practice	Lack of trust in government may limit message reception
Persuasion	Shifting the beliefs of citizens	Top-down	A clear strong capacity for delivery of a message	Too many conflicting perspectives or challenges can limit capacity to shift beliefs
Norm-making	Working with the processes that create positive norms in social groups	Bottom-up	An ability to cede control and work in interactive partnership with citizens	Governments fail to provide space and time to support citizen-led activities
Norm Selection	The complex and contradictory perspectives of citizens as they think through situations and apply established norms	Bottom-up	Developing and harnessing a local knowledge that would enable understanding of how choices are made	Governments face major obstacles in seeing the world like a citizen

Conclusions

Enhanced understanding and use of new knowledge of cognitive pathways, social norms and moral motivations should join with a continuing understanding of instrumental factors in shaping government policy-making. Nudge-based interventions provide a useful starting point but they are unlikely to deliver fully the collective outcomes sought in many forms of co-production.

Framing and persuasion forms of Nudge have a place but these top-down strategies need to be accompanied by bottom-up strategies if we want to achieve the more sustained behaviour change demanded by the Big Society. Bottom-up approaches require even greater culture change from government but may enable the tackling of issues that top-down Nudging strategies will not be able to grasp.

There is a tendency on the part of the advocates and users of Nudge to see it as the smart answer to old-fashioned bureaucratic government. Thaler and Sunstein (2008, p. 15) confidently assert that 'if incentives and nudges replace requirements and bans, government will be both smaller and more modest. So, to be clear: we are not for bigger government, just for better governance'.

The problem is that all forms of intervention by government have a Janus-like quality when it comes to normative judgement. Bureaucratic forms of regulation and oversight can be criticised as inflexible and suffocating but they can also be seen as treating all equally according to known and visible rules. Nudge strategies may be smarter and more fluid in style than bureaucratic regulation, but they cannot escape normative challenge entirely.

Forms of intervention that seek to trade on individuals' cognitive foibles, social practices and moral convictions are, if anything, more open to ethical challenge than more conventional means of influencing citizens' behaviour. Even the supporters of Nudge strategies in the media admit they are a form of sneaky government (Hickman 2011). Others less supportive of Nudge go for a more full-frontal attack: Dean calls the new movement a 'knowingly undemocratic way of doing business' (Dean 2010) whilst another commentator adds 'Nudging' us is not harmless – it is an underhand way of imposing solutions upon us, the very antithesis of choice' (Perks 2008).

The Nudge-inspired debate has brought home the importance of recognising that public policy interventions cannot be designed as if citizens were perfect and perfectly rational decision-makers. This constellation of new ideas is particularly pertinent given an increasing emphasis on co-production requiring the active engagement of citizens in delivery. But equally it is clear we are only in the foothills of understanding how to turn psychological and social insights into viable policy interventions, and only beginning to understand the politics and practices that would support the legitimisation and effectiveness of those interventions.

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