

GSR Behaviour Change Knowledge Review

Overview of Behaviour Change Models and their Uses

Briefing Note for Policy Makers

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1. Introduction

This briefing note provides a policy-focussed overview of the Government Social Research Behaviour Change Knowledge Review.

The rationale behind the review

The behaviour change agenda has increasingly been taken up across government. Policy making for behaviour change recognises that individuals need to change their own behaviour in order for government's wider goals for society to be achieved. The need for policy, which explicitly aims to bring about behavioural change among individuals is based on the realisation that for some complex problems, government cannot bring about change on its own. Lasting change requires a total partnership approach led by government, and including a wide range of stakeholders and organisations, as well as individuals themselves.

However behaviour change interventions are not just designed to reduce the harm to which vulnerable groups are themselves exposed, they are also designed to reduce the harm individuals' behaviour causes to others ('negative externalities'). Thus, the ban on smoking in public places (2007) was designed to reduce harm to others through changing the behaviour of smokers. Equally, interventions can also safeguard remote or future others; climate change-related policy such as the removal of energy-intensive white goods from the market could be taken as an example.

The review

The overall objective of the first phase of the review was to make sense of models of behaviour change for research analysts with the intention of improving advice to policy makers and improving the development and evaluation of interventions, which aim to change individual behaviour.

Specifically, the review was designed to:

- provide an overview of relevant models and theories;
- provide guidance on their uses and limits.

While the review started from the point of providing an introduction to behaviour change theory, it has resulted in practical guidance useful for both analysts and policy makers. While several other reviews of the theoretical evidence have been undertaken in recent years, this review differs by seeing the priority task for analysts and policy audiences as knowing how to use models, rather than simply knowing about them.

The GSR Advisory Group responsible for the review are now considering how to build upon this work – particularly looking at what works in changing behaviour and how models are applied in the UK public sector context.

Outputs

The review has resulted in two main reports, in addition to this Briefing Note:

- [A Practical Guide](#) Summarises the theory behind behaviour change and provides guidance on selecting and using models in developing behaviour change interventions.
- [A Reference Guide to Theory and Models](#). Provides a more indepth look at over 60 social-psychological behaviour change models and discusses issues to consider when considering implementing behaviour change interventions. Also includes an electronic bibliography which provides information about further reading in this area.

2. Why a Theory-Based Approach?

- In order to change public behaviours, it is necessary to work with the public. After all, it is their behaviour that is to be changed. Understanding the behaviour of the audience group in question is the key to developing effective interventions. Behavioural models are the principal **tool for understanding behaviour**.
- Once a behaviour is fully understood, the **factors which influence it can be identified**. Interventions can then be designed to alter those influencing factors, and the impact of an intervention can be measured in terms of the variation in those factors, as well as in the change in the target behaviour overall. By identifying the key factors influencing a behaviour, models provide specific objectives for interventions. Once specific objectives are in place, an intervention's effectiveness can be evaluated. Without these objectives, interventions are liable to take broad-brush approaches, the effectiveness of which can only be judged in terms of the target behaviour as a whole. Measuring changes in behaviour alone is often insufficient to measure impacts, as it is very hard to prove causality, and equally hard to isolate the effects of the intervention.
- Theory-based intervention can be seen as a development from evidence-based policy making. Behavioural models can be used to corroborate findings from research, and **refine our understanding of the audience groups and target behaviour**.
- Ultimately, a theory-based approach needs to be **flexible** to take account of different behavioural contexts and audience groups. Interventions should also incorporate learnings from practice, having identified what works in comparable interventions. Nonetheless, an underpinning theoretical framework is required, to structure the intervention, define the objectives, and measure the outcomes.

3. Key Findings from the Review

- This review of behaviour change theory observes a distinction between **models of behaviour** and **theories of change**. Models of behaviour help us to understand specific behaviours, by identifying the underlying factors which influence them. By contrast, theories of change show how behaviours change over time, and can be changed. The two bodies of theory are complementary; understanding both is necessary in order to develop effective approaches to behaviour change.
- Behavioural models show the factors determining behaviour to be complex, and to vary from behaviour to behaviour. Economic theory provided a starting point for understanding behaviour, seeing the individual as a rational 'utility maximiser', acting out of self-interest. This perspective has been built upon by social-psychological models which show a range of motivations underlying behavioural intentions.
- Social-psychological factors include **attitudes** and **beliefs**, **social norms**, and **agency** (the sense that individuals can successfully undertake the behaviour in question). A

further group of models argue that behaviour is less intentional, and is often driven by habits or emotions. Such behaviours are hard to change through rational appeals based on information or incentives.

- Some models include factors shaping individual behaviour from higher levels of scale, such as **macro-level factors** and **social conditions**. These models are important to those developing policy as often it is necessary to work directly on the external factors limiting individuals' behavioural options.
- Theories of change identify intervention techniques which can be effective in bringing about change, as well as suggesting broad approaches to intervention design, implementation and evaluation which can underpin effective policy planning and delivery. Diverse disciplines provide distinct approaches; for instance, **systems thinking** provides ways of looking at complex problems as wholes, while **learning theory** argues that change and learning are intertwined in processes of action and reflection.
- Behavioural models should be regarded as **concepts for helping us to understand behaviours**, rather than recipes for bringing about behaviour change. Models should not be adopted uncritically, but interrogated.
- Policy makers should adopt an approach to intervention development which embeds behavioural models in a process shaped by theories of change. The relevant **behavioural models suggest the key factors to work on**, which become the objectives for the intervention. Meanwhile theories of change argue for a development process based on audience engagement, piloting, and ongoing monitoring and adaptation.
- Ultimately, intervention strategies do not need to be based upon a single model, but on the key factors influencing a given behaviour, as identified in a range of models. If a single model is to be adopted, it must first be differentiated to make it specific to the audience groups in question, as well as to the target behaviour.
- Effective interventions require a detailed understanding of the **audience groups** in question, and the specific target behaviour. This theoretical understanding will need to be combined with practical considerations (such as the instruments available, and the potential side effects of intervening) in developing the prototype intervention.
- Intervention strategies must also be **flexible** to adapt to different contexts and audience groups. While theoretical models can provide the underpinning for an intervention, the practical elements should be worked out on the ground, through collaboration with the audience as 'actors' in the process of change. Ultimately, this review suggests that behaviour change is best pursued as a craft not a science

4. Further information

For further information about the review and links to all outputs see the Behaviour Change Knowledge Review pages on the GSR website www.gsr.gov.uk

It is also recommended talking to an analyst in your department if you have further queries about using behaviour change models or developing behaviour change interventions.