

Memos to the President From a “Council of Psychological Science Advisers”

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On September 15, 2015, President Obama issued an Executive Order recommending that executive departments and agencies use “behavioral science insights to better serve the American people.” The articles in this special section were already in press when the order was issued, and this serendipity further underscores the timeliness of this special section. These articles propose many examples of the very actions that could be taken by federal (as well as state and local) agencies to promote psychological science in the spirit of President Obama’s order.

Many psychological scientists hope that our work will be used to benefit humanity and not just our own CVs. This hope has often gone unrealized, in part because it can seem as though there is an invisible barrier between our science and the people who could most directly advocate for policy change. Fortunately, in recent years, this barrier has become more permeable.

In 2010, the United Kingdom’s government announced the launch of the Behavioural Insights Team—also known as the “Nudge Unit”—a group dedicated to applying insights from psychology and behavioral economics to public policy. In the United States, 2013 saw the creation of the White House Social and Behavioral Sciences Team, housed in the Office of Science and Technology Policy, similarly dedicated to promoting evidence-based policy evaluation. Comparable groups are formed (or being formed) in countries ranging from the Netherlands to Singapore to Australia. Although these groups do not guarantee that psychological science will be used to guide policy, they engender opportunities for psychologists to “have a seat at the table.”

Simultaneously, books such as Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein’s *Nudge* (2008), Dan Ariely’s *Predictably Irrational* (2008), and Daniel Kahneman’s *Thinking Fast and Slow* (2011) have applied psychological insights to public policy problems ranging from tax fraud to well-being to health behavior to saving for retirement. Indeed,

in his role as Administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs in the first Obama administration, Sunstein advocated for the utility of psychological science in assessing the impact of policies on citizens.

Of course, psychologists do have some history of contributing to public policy. In law, for example, in the early 1950s, future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall asked psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark to testify about their research on racial preferences in several school desegregation cases; that research and testimony later informed the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). More recently, psychological research on false convictions has been used by the federal government and various states, courts, and police precincts to change policies regarding the processes of conducting line-ups and interrogations, the admission of eyewitness experts as witnesses in court, and the blind acceptance of physical forensic evidence.

We believe that the current interest in behavioral science within government offers psychologists a new, more direct channel to influence public policy. We are not the first to note—and encourage—this developing trend, which includes *The Behavioral Foundations of Public Policy* (an edited volume published in 2012) and new journals devoted to policy, such as *Policy Insights from the Behavioral and Brain Sciences* and *Behavioral Science and Policy*, both of which published their first issues in 2015.

When we conceived of this special series, we modeled our ethos on that of the Council of Economic Advisors, whose mandate reads:

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The Council of Economic Advisers, an agency within the Executive Office of the President, is charged with offering the President objective economic advice on the formulation of both domestic and international economic policy. The Council bases its recommendations and analysis on economic research and empirical evidence, using the best data available to support the President in setting our nation's economic policy.¹

We imagine a complementary body, the Council of Psychological Science Advisors, charged with offering the President objective advice using the most robust psychological science to inform public policy. Our efforts build on related imaginings and calls to action, including the conversation between Walter Mischel and David Brooks at the Association for Psychological Science Annual Convention in 2011, and pieces by Thaler (2012) in the *New York Times* and Barry Schwartz (2012) in *The Atlantic* (and see Sunstein, in press). We chose a "Memo to the President" format: short papers that outline an important policy problem or societal issue, review the relevant psychological research, and use that research to suggest actionable policy changes.

After the Call, the Deluge

Rather than invite selected researchers to submit papers, we decided to cast a wide net, hoping to capture a diverse set of psychological scientists interested in policy. It was a two-stage process. In September 2014, we issued an Open Call for Proposals. Prospective authors were told that we would publish about 10 brief (1,500-word) memo-style articles that would pair a societal problem with a psychological "solution" to make a succinct point about how psychological science can inform policy. Authors submitted an abstract summarizing their idea. We expected 50 submissions; we hoped for 80 submissions; we received 222 submissions involving over 400 different authors, leaving no doubt that psychologists are interested in policy applications of their science.

Some submissions did not fulfill our criteria: They described either psychological research or a policy problem but not both. Some described research that (we believed) was not yet ripe for enactment, and some proposed solutions that had already been enacted. And, for better and for worse, many submissions exhibited significant overlap. The two general topics with by far the greatest number of submissions were health and education; both are well represented in our final selection of memos. That said, the range of topics was enormous and it was gratifying to see the scope of psychological science applications that might one day help shape policy.



In addition to seeking a broad set of topics, we sought a broad set of approaches. Would the suggested policy change involve education or regulation? Was it targeted at actions by individuals acting alone or aimed at public (e.g., schools, courts) or private (e.g., businesses) organizations? Were the recommendations targeted at changing how people act in their existing circumstances or at changing the circumstances in which they act?

Tackling Key Challenges

To honor the enthusiasm and generativity of the submissions, we decided to invite 12 memos rather than the original 10. But we did not accept only 12 proposals. Because of the high quality of some of the overlapping proposals, we invited 17 groups to participate but required 9 of them to work with other groups as teams on the same memo. The final set of memos addresses core issues that underlie some of the key domestic and global challenges we face.

Health

The series includes several articles concerned with improving health. Rothman and colleagues (2015, this issue) note the difficulties people experience in closing the gap between good intentions and actual behaviors, highlighting how the science of habit change and goal formation can improve health. Mann, Tomiyama, and Ward (2015, this issue) focus on environmental changes that can promote exercise and reduce overeating—offering recommendations to combat obesity that move away from models that blame individuals for lack of willpower.

Two very different populations that are both at heightened risk for injuring themselves are adolescents and older people; changing their environments can reduce

these risks. Steinberg (2015, this issue) highlights how research on adolescent brain development can be used to create wiser environments that reduce common risky teen behaviors, such as unprotected sex and substance abuse. Similarly, Ross and Schryer (2015, this issue) draw from research on memory cues to show that there are many environmental changes that make it easier for older (and younger) adults to remember to take their medicines, navigate their way through unfamiliar places, and generally reduce the negative repercussions of ordinary memory failures.

Education

Psychological science can also play a central role in improving educational outcomes. Rattan, Savani, Chugh, and Dweck (2015, this issue) review research on creating "academic mindsets," which shows that emphasizing growth and belonging can close pernicious achievement gaps and promote educational equality and help all students to meet their full academic potential. Shifting the focus from the school to the home, Maloney, Converse, Gibbs, Levine, and Beilock (2015, this issue) leverage research on parent-child interactions to illustrate how policy changes that promote early childhood education in the home may enable children to enter school better prepared and on a more equal footing.

Our institutions and organizations

Several memos offer suggestions for helping people be more safe and productive at school and work, and making those environments more rewarding to individuals and society. Barnes and Drake (2015, this issue) address the widespread problem of sleep deficits, describing the mismatch between students' school requirements and their sleep patterns, as well as the serious repercussions that follow from extended and ever-changing work shifts. Ayal, Gina, Barkan, and Ariely (2015, this issue) show how environments that remind people to be ethical and reduce anonymity can greatly reduce not only large-scale fraud but also the small indiscretions that underlie everyday unethical behavior. Finally, Galinsky et al. (2015, this issue) point to the many social and economic benefits that follow from enhancing diversity (e.g., in the workplace) and creating a society with greater exposure to diverse ideas and peoples.

Securing our future

Across many domains, individuals make bad decisions that in aggregate have negative future consequences for society. At the individual level, Hershey, Sussman, O'Brien, and Bryan (2015, this issue) review the mistakes

people make in predicting the future and offer suggestions to help individuals make better financial choices and reduce credit card debt. Dhimi, Mandel, Mellers, and Tetlock (2015, this issue) consider how research on judgment and decision making can improve intelligence for national security. Finally, van der Linden, Maibach, and Leiserwitz (2015, this issue) draw on research on group norms and psychological distance to motivate individual action to reduce global climate change.

Together, these memos are filled with policy suggestions that can help people do more of the things they want to do and less of the things they do not want to do; that reduce personal and societal risk; and that promote health, learning, and equality. They illustrate the promise of using psychological science to guide policy to solve significant societal problems.

We invited comments from two of the foremost international leaders on the application of behavioral science to shape public policy: Cass Sunstein, a Professor at Harvard Law School and former member of the Obama administration, and David Halpern, a psychologist who leads the United Kingdom's Behavioural Insights Team. Sunstein and Halpern review the success stories of behavioral science being used to shape policy in the United States and United Kingdom, respectively, and consider how the suggestions put forward in this special section could advance policy. Critically, although they believe that some suggestions are more likely to be actionable than others, they convey the clear message that psychological science can and should inform effective policymaking.

Conclusion

In 2009, Robert Cialdini wrote a provocative piece for this journal titled "We Have to Break Up," explaining why he had decided to retire early from his psychology department. He described how the field of psychology, in its increased emphasis on underlying mental processes, had moved away from research applicable to current social issues and to people's lives more generally. We only partly agree: There is no doubt that psychologists need to do more research that has direct policy relevance, but this special series demonstrates that psychologists already have much to offer. Our hope is that this set of Memos to the President will illustrate ways that existing psychological research can inform current policy issues and also stimulate new research to tackle these and other societal problems.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

Note

1. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/cea/about>

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