REMAKING CITIZENS FOR THE 'BIG SOCIETY': THE RISE OF BEHAVIOURAL PSYCHOLOGY AND NEW INTERVENTIONS

KATHRYN ECCLESTONE, PROFESSOR OF EDUCATION AND SOCIAL INCLUSION, UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

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INTRODUCTION

Whatever the political hue of government, the state has always tried to change our behaviours. From straightforward information campaigns, subtle and not-so subtle scare tactics, to targets, tax breaks, promises of deferred gratification, punishments, sticks, rewards and incentives, local and national governments use an array of tactics that encourage us to do the right thing for ourselves and others. Indeed, history shows that the state project of behaviour change dates back to the 1830s.

The much-touted phrase 'from nanny to nudge' suggests that the Conservative-led government wants to move away from New Labour's attempts to regulate our lifestyles in order to find new ways to shape the habits and attitudes of good citizenship and spread them more widely. Policy makers hope to change our expectations of what local and national government should provide as universal public services, and encourage us to be proactive in changing our own and others' behaviours.

Certain behaviours are a particular concern. While every other budget is being cut, local authorities in areas with the highest levels of obesity, alcohol problems and poor diet can have extra money from a ring-fenced budget to nudge citizens into achieving public health goals. Formed in 2010 as part of the Cabinet Office, the Behavioural Insight Team is looking

to behavioural psychology and neuroscience to offer effective ways for getting citizens to make better lifestyle choices. At the same time, citizens are to be encouraged to take on a more active, voluntary role in areas traditionally run by local and national government, including housing, youth work and social care.

The prominence of behavioural science in the contemporary politics of behaviour change extends to emotional and psychological aspects of our lives, reflected in state-sponsored interventions for emotional well-being, and renewed political interest in requiring schools to play an active role in 'character development'.

These developments raise political and social questions:

- Is changing our behaviour *per se* a legitimate aim for government? What are the implications of expanding behavioural interventions into areas such as emotional well-being and character development?
- In face of policy rhetoric about the Big Society and 'people power', what happens to autonomy and agency when unseen experts and policy wonks seek to subvert competent adults' decisions about what they eat, how many units they drink or whether they give up time to help the community. Or, if they decide to do these things, should government determine how?
- Is it a given that we all agree on 'the good life'? Who has decided that the model citizen should be exercise-loving, abstemious, emotionally-literate and volunteering ? Who decides what makes 'citizens of good character'?
- Is nudge a clever if slightly manipulative version of state interference, or a more progressive way of helping people help themselves?
- What do contemporary approaches to behaviour change reveal about images of human nature embedded in them?

1. EXPANDING THE SCOPE OF BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

As well as areas such as health and social participation, aspects of life once seen as virtues, the outcomes of moral choices, or the results of socialisation and lifetime development, are now depicted as behaviours. This draws emotional well-being and character development into the remit of state-sponsored behaviour change.

According to positive psychology, learned optimism is at the heart of well-being (Seligman et al 2009). Its many supporters argue that this, together with resilience, stoicism, a positive and optimistic outlook, an ability to be in the moment or 'in flow', as well as feelings of satisfaction, being supported, loved and respected, emotional regulation, emotional literacy and empathy, managing your emotions, equanimity, compassion, feeling more and caring for others, and not comparing yourself to others can all be taught and learned (Huppert 2007, Layard 2007).

Supporters present these constructs as 'skills' or 'capabilities' vital for life and educational success, arguing that social and economic factors account for less than half of their development (eg Layard 2005, Huppert 2007). Promoting school-based emotional well-being interventions, Richard Layard stated that "*there is an overwhelming case for the state to intervene in the character development of every family*" (Layard 2007).

Following the riots in August 2011, renewed political interest for schools to play a leading role in character and moral development reveals the same tendency to psychologise attributes, attitudes and dispositions evident in policy and practice around emotional well-being. A recent inquiry by the think-tank DEMOS defines the various attributes of character as "*a set of capabilities (or virtues) that underpin a good and flourishing life, but which are also instrumental to success in a (comparatively) value-free sense*" (Lexmond and Grist 2011, 29). Schools and parents are key components in building character (ibid; see also Lexmond and Reeves 2009).

Advocates of emotional well-being interventions are re-presenting them as part of character education. Anthony Seldon, headteacher of Wellington School, commends positive psychology for teaching perseverance, courage, belief in justice, loving and being loved, curiosity, wisdom and humour, alongside traditional public school discipline, sport and 'houses' (2011). An architect of the previous government's Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning strategy offers it as '*one initiative that seeks to develop character through the taught curriculum'*, adding resilience, empathy, setting learning goals, friendship, determination and application, anger management and staying in control to the list of character capabilities (2011 91).

The cumulative effect is to encompass even more behaviours amenable to intervention than was the case with emotional well-being. Liam Byrne, shadow secretary of state for work and pensions, adds a therapeutic emphasis: "*Our young people want to develop, not only their understanding of the things around them – but an* ***understanding of the things inside them – self-confidence, self-esteem, ambition, motivation, nerve****. Things some of us but not all were lucky to get from our parents; things that a small few often get from the finest public schools…This is why I have come to believe that a new agenda for character education is so important.*" (Byrne quoted by DEMOS 2011, my emphasis).

2. LOOKING FOR GOOD SCIENCE

Attempts to find scientific evidence for politically-sponsored interventions were well advanced under the previous government. Introducing a report from the All-Party Parliamentary Group on 'well-being in the classroom' in 2007, Baroness Susan Greenfield said "*there is overwhelming sympathy for schools to do more to protect and promote...emotional well-being",* calling for support for existing initiatives and for "*recommendations that carry considerable weight both scientifically and politically*" (Sharples 2007, 1). Richard Layard argues:

By using our brains we have largely conquered nature. We have defeated most vertebrates and many insects and bacteria.... The great challenge now is to use our mastery over nature to master ourselves and to give us more of the happiness that we all want. (Layard 2005: 27.

In a similar vein, Matthew Taylor chief executive of the RSA argues that advances in psychological science are now able to tell us how to understand and then work on our emotions, and that this is no different or more problematic than using scientific insights to improve physical workouts (Taylor 2008).

These aspirations are fuelled by research that combines economics, behavioural/positive psychology and sociology in order to understand the interplay between people's rational, irrational, conscious and unconscious behaviours in different aspects of life, and to use new scientific thinking to describe what makes for success and happiness (eg Brooks 2011).

Amidst these ideas, 'nudge' has caught popular and political attention (eg Thayer and Sunstein 2008, John et al 2011, Cabinet Office 2010). This aims to engineer 'choice architecture', the subtle signals and environments that affect our behaviour in specific contexts before we have chosen consciously to act in a certain way. According to a report for the Cabinet Office, because 'people are sometimes seemingly irrational and inconsistent in their choices', attention should shift from 'facts and information'. Instead, policy makers should manipulate our 'choice architecture' to 'change behaviour without changing minds' (Cabinet Office 2010, 5).

This is an important departure from past political commitments to justifying traditional approaches to behaviour change, such as regulatory interventions or information designed to persuade or dissuade, through political and civic debate.

In response to such criticisms, some supporters of nudge argue that behavioural science is a shift from a deficit model which leads professionals to identify, individuals' behavioural needs and thenturn them into targets and outcomes, usually without consultation or meaningful collaboration. Instead, progressive uses of nudge offer an asset-based approach that encourages individuals, communities and professionals to agree what behaviours should change, and then to decide what interventions might work in the social, cultural contexts that shape collective and individual behaviours (eg. John et al 2011).

Yet, political interest in behavioural science is broader than nudge. A report for the Royal Society of Arts argues that:

> *A greater comprehension of cognitive pathways, social norms and moral motivations should join with a continuing understanding of instrumental factors in shaping government policy-making. Given the demands of co-production, and the limits to available finance, it could be argued that a shift to a more subtle range of interventions is essential to the future of public services. Our caution rests not so much over the ethical or political issues thrown up by such developments..... There is currently a gap between our understanding of general and psychological processes and capacity to ensure that these insights become effective tools for social engineering* (Stoke and Mosely 2010, p23).

Although behavioural psychology has long influenced areas such as child guidance, the diagnosis of special educational needs and the use of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy in schools, historical precedents should not obscure a crucial difference from the past. The new combination of behavioural psychology, economics and social science is predicated on growing scepticism about rational, conscious approaches to behaviour change. There is a view that classes, public information campaigns, doctors' surgeries, or even self-help books, do not work: despite our best intentions, we are easily sabotaged by unconscious drivers from past experience, emotional reactions to situations and other irrational aspects of ourselves.

A recent popular example of these arguments is David Brooks' book *The Social Animal: the hidden sources of love, character and achievement* which was widely promoted and debated by think tanks and policy makers in 2011. According to Brooks, it is not that we are victims of our unconscious selves. Instead, shaped by the interplay of genes, culture, upbringing and education, and the institutions and networks in which we live and work, it is possible for us to influence at least some of these. From this perspective, although we cannot master these factors, the art of living well is to know how to steer our natures, and slowly remodel our characters. Supported by policy-oriented bodies such as DEMOS and the RSA, he argues for policies that strengthen 'character' and life skills, especially for those left behind by deindustrialisation and rising inequality (Brooks 2011).

IMAGES OF HUMAN NATURE

Interventions carry implicit and explicit images of human nature. Some approaches to nudge are predicated on ideas that humans are often irrational, too busy, unwilling or unable to think through difficult and complicated questions, and just need nudging towards rational decision-making. Other interventions might depict us as driven by self-interest and the desire to maximize our own advantages at the expense of others: for example, some nudge-based approaches seek to make us more altruistic or compassionate through incentives that we will benefit materially or psychologically in terms of our own well-being. Some interventions might regard participants as innately altruistic, compassionate and collectively-minded, and then create the social conditions that enable people to build on those attributes and decide how to behave. Others depict participants as emotionally or psychologically vulnerable, and therefore requiring therapeutic support.

The tendency to psychologise complex areas of life goes hand in hand with enthusiasm for science and measures. According to Lexmond and Grist, "*We need to get better at measuring the development of character capabilities and the range of outcomes to which they lead*" (2011 137). Arguing that narrow views of education based on examination results and narrow economic measures of prosperity "*miss out on most of the important things in life*" the authors advocate that "*capabilities important to good and successful lives (empathy, resilience, creativity, application and so on) and the outcomes that embody those good and successful lives (happiness, health, trust, beauty, connectivity and so on) are woefully undervalued by policy makers....because they are so hard to quantify and the tools we have to measure them are so rudimentary*" (op cit, 137-38).

Faith in accurate measures leads to behavioural training, including training for parents and programmes to help children regulate their emotions and 'behave better', "*using a proven technology – not just pious exhortations*" (op cit, 138). Hopes for more robust assessments include 'sophisticated tools' to measure communities' well-being, as well as brain assessments of a newborn child's 'epigenetic' code to see if it is already in 'survival mode' and "*likely to be oversensitive or paranoid*" and therefore in need of different support environments, and of the epigenetic states "*that help people to overcome adversity successfully or the types of cultural institutions – family, schools, community groups and so on – that support people to buck the trend*" (ibid).

Advocacy of such interventions is offered as a way of overcoming the social disadvantage that parents inflict on their children, and which 'poor character' exacerbates. These images are reinforced by an underlying theme in social policy and associated research where emotional and psychological vulnerability has come to characterise whole groups and communities (eg McLoughlin 2011, Ecclestone 2011).

There is therefore new enthusiasm for turning social and individual traits, attributes, dispositions and moral choices into utilitarian behaviours that can be trained. At the same time, the prevalence of counselling, therapy and psychoanalysis in private life and through educational and other interventions, offers ways to explore the interplay between conscious and unconscious, rational and emotional factors that drive those behaviours, dispositions and attributes.

CHALLENGING A BEHAVIOURAL APPROACH

Renewed political interest in behavioural science, and in measuring complex aspects of human behaviour, raises questions about whether these are a basis for progressive social policy. The salient point here is not whether faith in science is well-founded or realistic. Instead, a warning by sociologist C.Wright Mills in 1959 is as relevant now as it was half a century ago. For him, the purpose of social science should not be to predict and control human behaviour, or engage in human engineering because such ideas reveal a rationalistic, empty optimism rooted in ignorance of the role of reason in human affairs, the nature of power and its relations to knowledge, and the meaning of moral action. Mills argued that talking glibly about prediction and control is to assume the perspective of the bureaucrat to whom, as Karl Marx observed, the world is an object to be manipulated. For Mills, attempts to predict and control behaviour substitute technocratic slogans for reasoned moral choices (Mills 1959).

In a modern version of these warnings, philosopher Tom Nagel responds to contemporary efforts to predict and control what people will do by arguing that "*even if empirical methods enable us to understand sub-rational processes better, the crucial question is, how are we to use this kind of self-understanding*?" (Nagel 2011, 2). The civic task is to go beyond simply discovering unacknowledged influences on our conduct and adapting our behaviour accordingly. Instead, we need to learn how to respond critically (ibid).

This is no easy civic task. Public services have become preoccupied with ever-more accurate ways of identifying and assessing a widening array of behavioural traits and capabilities. Rooted in a view that many citizens are both psychologically vulnerable and trainable, the drive to predict future problems and diagnose our psychological states legitimises state intervention. One effect has been to move responsibility for complex areas of socialisation, character development, health and lifestyle choices away from parents, individuals and the wider community into schools, guidance and welfare agencies and psychology services.

Yet, life, morality and politics are not science and their improvement requires civic debate and thought, not about how to find the most effective means of shaping people, but about what our ends should be. This means challenging a social project that hopes to engineer the emotional well-being, character, health and social behaviours of citizens seen as vulnerable

whilst avoiding civic engagement in the political and educational questions this raises. The problem is that if we are seen as emotionally vulnerable and amenable to sophisticated forms of behavioural training, we are in no fit state to engage in these questions.

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