



Behaviour Change policies in the UK: An anthropological perspective



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ABSTRACT

Anthropologists and geographers have long challenged reified theories of the state as a coherent whole representing strategic interests and promoting unified political projects. Instead the power of the state has been identified in its ability to sustain its own myth through negotiating its relation to civil society, through peopled practices, and through the spatialization of authority. This paper develops an ethnographic account of the recent enthusiasm for Behaviour Change in UK public policy, the consequences of which are two-fold. First we demonstrate how an anthropological perspective explains the emergence of Behaviour Change as a set of ideas, people, organisations, events and happenings: not only as a sometimes contradictory policy 'agenda', but as a diverse and novel industry or cadre of expertise; and one that is played out in geographical ways. Secondly, we seek to show how the particularities of Behaviour Change policies pose new challenges to anthropological approaches to the state.

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1. Introduction

Our aims in this paper are to use insights from anthropological conceptualisations of the state as a way of understanding the emerging significance of a range of Behaviour Change initiatives within UK public policy. We maintain that these anthropological conceptualisations of the state help us better to understand some of the key processes that are involved in the emergence of this new way of framing public policy. We also contend that the growing significance of Behaviour Change initiatives in places such as the UK has the potential, in turn, to enrich anthropological understandings of the state.

Over recent years, a range of Behaviour Change initiatives have become increasingly prevalent in the UK and other states and our first aim in this paper is to illustrate some of the processes that have been associated with this development (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008; Tasic, 2011; Jones et al., 2011; Whitehead et al., 2011). Behaviour Change policies begin from the premise that human actors are not wholly rational in the decisions that they make and, as such, do not tally with the way in which decision-makers have been conceptualised within conventional microeconomics. Because of this emphasis on the need to understand the actual, rather than the theoretical, factors that influence human behaviour and decision-making, proponents of Behaviour Change policies turn to insights from behavioural economics, psychology and neuroscience (Kahneman et al., 1982; Ariely, 2008; Thaler and Sunstein,

2008; Akerlof and Shiller, 2009). Academics writing from this perspective have taken seriously the "choice architectures" (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008) that impact on the actual decisions made by individuals and the inner influences of the brain and nervous system on this process. Following on from this, advocates of Behaviour Change policies are united in their belief that there is considerable potential in using these ideas as a way of formulating more efficient and cost-effective policy interventions – by shaping the contexts in which people make decisions. The ideological underpinning of this new kind of approach is libertarian or soft paternalism; a way of encouraging individuals to make appropriate decisions without curtailing their right to make decisions. Libertarian paternalism has gained most publicity in the form of the best-selling book *Nudge*, written by Thaler and Sunstein (2008).

Our second aim is to show how anthropological conceptualisations of the state can help us make sense of important aspects of the emergence of Behaviour Change initiatives in the UK. There have been attempts to examine what we understand as the "state"¹ from an explicitly anthropological perspective. Instead of viewing the state as an extension of the interests of capital and the product of the irreconcilability of class tensions (e.g. Althusser,

¹ Throughout this paper, we adhere to the notion that the allegedly unitary organization that is referred to as "the state" is in fact a mishmash of different peopled institutions with competing priorities. The state, therefore, is an amalgam of different instantiated practices that gives the impression of coherence and durability. While we have used scare quotes in this opening sentence to give the impression of "state" that is socially constructed, we believe that doing so throughout the article would be tiresome. When we refer to the state, without scare quotes, in the remaining sections of this article, we want to assure the reader that we view it as the seemingly coherent product of a set of competing practices and interests.

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1970), or an autonomous actor that seeks to influence socio-economic processes taking place within the state's boundaries (Weber, 1947: 153–154), those promoting an anthropological approach to studying the state view it as an 'assemblage' of different kinds of peopled institution (Mitchell, 2006 [1999]; Painter, 2006). Authors working in this area assert that what we commonly understand as the coherent and unitary organisation of the state is in fact made up of a mixture of different institutions. Some of these are conventionally understood as being part of a state apparatus while others are part of a so-called 'shadow state' (Wolch, 1990; Trudeau, 2008). In focusing on the fine-grained, ethnographic and peopled aspects of various state institutions, academics working in this area have been able to demonstrate the variegated and incoherent character of what we understand as the state. The state, as such, is made up of a multitude of different human and non-human actors, whose actions sometime reinforce and sometimes contradict each other. The notion of a coherent and purposive state that has dominated much of social science for the past one hundred years, when viewed from this anthropological angle, is a myth. And yet, therein lies the power of the state. This mythical state is an "invented whole of materialized artifice into whose woeful insufficiency of being we have placed soulstuff" (Taussig, 1997: 3). Our contention is that an anthropological perspective can help us understand key aspects of the growth of this Behaviour Change agenda. Moreover, as geographers, we maintain that a geographical focus can help us to develop a more nuanced understanding of what we may term – following Brenner and Theodore (2002) – an "actually existing libertarian paternalism" that varies from place to place, as opposed to some abstract monolithic precept (see also Radcliffe, 2001; Painter, 2006, 2010; Corbridge et al., 2005).

Our third aim is to show how the emergence of Behaviour Change as a means of framing public policy in places such as the UK has the potential to help us to highlight the salience of – and indeed augment – anthropological understandings of the state. In particular, we contend that the specific character of these policies exemplifies a qualitative shift in some of the key tenets of anthropological understandings of the state. Behaviour Change policies, we maintain, highlight – arguably more than any other kind of governmental intervention – the value of anthropological understandings of the state in: problematising the boundary between the state and its non-state counterpart; charting the peopled practices that characterise all states; mapping the multiple spaces in and through which the state becomes instantiated within people's lives. As such, Behaviour Change initiatives re-inforce the value in pursuing an academic understanding of the state that is based on anthropological perspectives.

2. Mapping Behaviour Change policy agendas

Anecdotal evidence for the emergence of Behaviour Change policies in states is not hard to find. In the USA, for instance, much has been made of the fact that Cass Sunstein, one of the authors of *Nudge* – one of the key texts that seeks to promote the value of behavioural economics (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008) – was appointed to the post of Administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. The Office's aim is to develop and implement federal policies with regard to information technology, information policy, privacy, and statistical policy. Since one of the main principles of Behaviour Change policies is that the distribution of information can be manipulated in order to encourage individuals to make better decisions, it is clear that Sunstein's role places him in a powerful position to promote libertarian paternalism within US federal policies or, as a report in the New York Times stated, to make 'regulations more supple' and presumably more effective (New York Times, 2010). In New Zealand in 2007, a

Kiwisaver pension scheme has recently been created. Instead of having to opt in to this scheme, all workers in New Zealand have been automatically enrolled onto it but, at the same time, have had the option of opting out during the first month. The scheme has been successful in confronting New Zealanders' cognitive tendencies towards non-pension saving inertia, and there are already some indications that it has helped to increase rates of long-term saving in New Zealand (New Zealand Herald, 2010). In France, too, the Centre d'analyse stratégique (CDS) has recently outlined how lessons from the neurosciences, and the emerging discipline of neuroeconomics can be used in the development of public health communications (CDS, 2010) and ecological behaviours (CDS, 2011). And the EU has published a report on the implications of behavioural economics for consumer and health behaviours (Directorate General for Health and Consumers/DG-SANCO, 2010).

Meanwhile, Behaviour Change policies have become notably popular in the UK. Our research has suggested that there are three main reasons for the use of Behaviour Change insights as a way of framing government policy in the UK. First, it has been deemed that these kinds of policies are more effective than conventional ones since they are predicated on a more sophisticated understanding of individual behaviour and culture. Second, there has been a belief that libertarian paternalism is morally beneficial since it is said to enable a more effective kind of personal responsibility by allowing individuals to make their own decisions while, at the same time, providing them with guidance on the most appropriate decisions that they should make. Third, it is argued that the growing challenges facing government – whether in relation to various forms of ill health, an ageing population that is increasingly becoming a drain on resources or environmental problems, most notably climate change, or the daunting realisation of sovereign indebtedness – mean that it is impossible for governments to continue to provide services in the same way as they have done in the past. Behaviour Change policies are, therefore, deemed to be more cost effective than their predecessors. While it is possible to contest each of these claims, they at least demonstrate how Behaviour Change interventions have come to be viewed as attractive solutions to various policy issues.

The upshot of all these factors has been an increased engagement with Behaviour Change ideas among different government departments. One of the first documents to indicate a need to engage with this agenda was *Personal Responsibility and Behaviour Change*, published by the Cabinet Office in 2004 (Halpern et al., 2004). A number of subsequent documents produced by the Cabinet Office have sought to provide guidance for government departments on the use of insights from these so-called 'psy-sciences' (Rose, 2010) when framing policy (e.g. Knott et al., 2008; Dolan et al., 2010); these have been taken up by various government departments. Some of the key themes emerging here include the need to provide information in more effective ways to target audiences; so that messages are more readily accepted by subjects. So, for instance, the Department of Health (DoH, 2004) and DEFRA (2007) have increasingly sought to use social marketing – where marketing insights and tools are used for social ends – as a way of segmenting populations into target groups. The role of social marketing within government received a further fillip with the creation of a National Social Marketing Centre in 2006, along with the deployment of social marketing experts into government departments. Other kinds of government intervention have involved developing more subtle interventions in the 'choice architectures' facing citizens. The Department for Work and Pensions' (DWP, 2006) *Personal Accounts* has set in motion an attempt to use innovative default settings as a means of avoiding individuals' tendency to prevaricate when making decisions about their long-term future. Individuals will increasingly have to opt out of pension schemes rather than having to opt in. Similarly, the issue of organ

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