

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

# Changing behaviour change: The case for a Global Association of Applied Behavioural Scientists

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### Abstract

It is unlikely that you would recommend to a friend that they follow the legal advice of an individual who had merely skimmed a copy of a popular law book. Although the same maxim should extend to applied behavioural sciences, recommending whom to consult for legitimate behavioural science advice is a difficult task because the discipline is both rapidly growing and unregulated. Reports from both academics and qualified practitioners suggest an increasing number of agencies and consultancies now offer behavioural science services, some whose experience and qualifications extend to little more than *'having read Nudge'*. Currently, no professional society exists that serves the public interest by offering guidance to individuals or companies commissioning behavioural advice, and which also represents the interests of bona-fide applied behavioural scientists. We argue that the time is right for a Global Association of Applied Behavioural Scientists.

### JEL Classification:

### Keywords

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## I need somebody

When the need to deal with a legal issue arises, many people will recommend the advice and help of a competent and experienced professional. This is wholly sensible. Few people have the necessary knowledge and training to understand legal argument and precedent. So it is that lawyers – given their expertise, experience and skills – will be best placed to deal with these challenges. Knowledgeable professionals play an important role in society. Their greater know-how and experience not only serve to provide reassurance. They also help to save time, energy and costly mistakes (Stehr & Grundmann, 2011). More broadly, trained experts and skilled professionals absolve us of the burden of having to acquire a minimal level of knowledge about most things in order to successfully navigate through life's complexities and challenges. It is usually far more efficient, and certainly less taxing, to defer to those with talent or specialised knowledge. These people become a society's experts and, as a result, are considered to possess *instrumental value* (Martin & Marks, 2019).

Extant literature shows the professionals whose advice is most likely to be sought out, listened to and acted upon are those perceived to possess; (i) expertise, (ii) trustworthiness, and (iii) similarities with those seeking help (Dolan et al., 2012). A start-up issued with a copyright infringement might contact the Intellectual Property Lawyers Organisation

(IPLLO) to find a competent solicitor to advise them. Having identified one or more suitable experts, it might then choose who to recruit based on perceptions of that expert's trustworthiness and similarity. For example, having located a qualified solicitor, the start-up might check online reviews, notice they have successfully conducted work with companies similar to them, and call.

Although this chain of events will be a common one when seeking advice or help from a lawyer or any of a myriad of other professionals, it is less likely to occur when seeking a suitably qualified professional in behavioural science – which can be defined as the systematic study of human behaviour and strategies to intentionally and verifiably change it leveraging insights including (but not limited to) behavioural economics, social psychology, decision science, and neuroscience. There are at least three reasons why. First, no professional association currently exists to assist those seeking a suitably qualified applied behavioural scientist. The establishment of such a body, properly constituted, with a clear membership mandate that includes an agreed set of quality, rigorous and ethical standards would fill this gap.

Second, there are currently no explicit financial or reputational incentives to seek professional advice. This current state of affairs therefore represents a market failure. There are many possible reasons for this, but we have known for a very long time that there is a potential "market for lemons" when

buyers are unable to differentiate between high and low quality products, and when sellers have an incentive to convince buyers that they are selling a high quality products when, in fact, like many behavioural science consultancies, they are selling lemons (Akerlof, 1970.) Consequently, money could be wasted implementing behavioural interventions recommended by ‘amateurs’ that fail or even backfire. The tarnishing of reputations is also a risk to those buyers who commission behavioural science services from those not suited or trained for the job.

Third, despite an increased interest in behavioural science (OECD, 2017) brought about by the success of popular books, promises of impressive returns and even the establishment of government-based behavioural insights teams (e.g. Nudge Units), many people claim, with the gift of hindsight of course, to have known all along. A common perception remains, at least to some, that behavioural science comprises largely an assortment of obvious and unsurprising observations (Stafford, 2007). For example, in contrast to fields such as law or medicine or plumbing even, which require dedicated learning and practice to achieve even a basic level of competence, many claim to possess an intuitive understanding of social psychology – a single discipline within behavioural science that is frequently drawn heavily upon for applied insights – by virtue of living life and interacting with others (Goldstein et al., 2008). Such thinking might result in a reduced need for a qualified professional because the advice of knowledgeable experts is most likely to be sought in situations of uncertainty or unfamiliarity (Cialdini, 1993). In the context of Dolan et al.’s expertise – trustworthiness – similarity model (Dolan et al., 2012), if people do not perceive the need for the first of these features (expertise), then the latter two (trustworthiness and similarity) are likely to be elevated in importance when making a decision.

### Not just anybody

The ‘perceived’ intuitive appeal of behavioural science has raised concerns in the minds of a number of legitimate professionals that ‘amateurs’ working in management, marketing and communication consultancies – whose livelihoods will often be determined by their ability to influence and change behaviour – might claim expertise in behavioural science despite possessing little in the way of qualifications or experience (Rubinstein, 2019). The fact that these agencies, as well as the practitioners within them, are likely to be trusted and familiar might make their intuitions and introspections more compelling and persuasive to their clients. This can be problematic because human thinking and behaviour is not necessarily intuitive. Nor is it predictable on the basis of a single person’s introspection. Rather it is complex, socially intertwined and heavily dependent on context (Bandura, 2001; Strack & Deutsch, 2004; Evans & Stanovich, 2013; Bossaerts & Murawski, 2017). For example, policymakers employing juvenile mums as classroom messengers in an attempt to highlight the dangers of teenage pregnancy and bring about their

reduction – a programme that has been adopted by a number of policymakers – seems an intuitively sensible and pragmatic solution. But studies have shown that this approach can result in unintended consequences, making problems worse, not better. Teenagers seeing motherhood as a way to establish an adult identity, satisfy their desire to feel needed and obtain financial support were more likely to plan pregnancy or actively avoid contraception (Näslund-Hadley & Binstock, 2010).

Additionally, just because a single behavioural insight – like adding a social norm message to a tax demand letter that honestly signals the already high level of compliance – has been shown to deliver a demonstrable impact in some contexts (Hallsworth et al., 2017), a layperson might think that deploying a similar or combination of insights should lead to amplified effects. But the reality is much more nuanced. Not every behavioural insight has the same impact because contexts differ. Similarly, while some studies have shown how the use of two mechanistically different behavioural insights can, in combination, lead to an improvement in desired impact (Martin et al., 2012) other studies have shown the opposite (Dolan & Metcalfe, 2013). Consequently, more should be demanded of those claiming to ‘do’ behavioural science than an ability to charismatically regurgitate a handful of eye-catching case studies contained in popular books.

Further challenges are faced due to an increased availability of websites, newsfeeds and Twitter groups where the latest behavioural science research and findings can be found. Frequently, however, these sources do not approach the findings they disseminate critically and may either exaggerate their scope and magnitude or even present questionable findings as strong evidence. This is especially concerning given recent replication failures in psychology showing the importance of scrutinizing research findings based on their methodological rigour before recommending their practical application (Nosek et al., 2015; Ruggeri et al., 2020). Because fake news via popular media spreads quickly, people may continue to believe in them even after they are debunked (Lazer et al., 2018). As a consequence, agencies without the necessary scientific background to appraise the quality of research findings may offer advice and interventions founded on questionable evidence reported in the media. These agencies may further propagate exaggerated claims about questionable findings and therefore strengthen the impression that behavioural science is intuitive and easy which could harm consumers as well as damage the reputation of the discipline.

### You know I need someone

Helpfully, much is already being done to build a cohort of suitably credentialed, globally situated professionals. Increasing numbers of universities including Harvard, Yale, Warwick, University of Pennsylvania and the University of Technology Sydney now offer post-graduate level programmes studying the major models and principles of behavioural science that include, crucially, methods of testing and validation that might be missed, or even disregarded, by practitioners. The London

School of Economics offers an Executive Masters programme specifically designed to meet the needs of seasoned, working professionals who wish to combine rigorous learning with practical real-world applications in their organisations. Encouragingly, alumni from many of these programmes are now working as Executives and even Chief Behaviour Officers in companies that see the benefit of having in-house expertise. Others, recognising that the majority of applied behavioural science needs are still outsourced, lead their own consultancies.

Yet despite the enthusiasm of higher education institutions to offer Masters and PhD level programmes that satisfy the current waves of interest in our field, we shouldn't conclude that the ethical and effective application of behavioural science is solely an academic endeavour limited to those with higher degrees. One of the inherent joys of behavioural science concerns not only its theoretical frameworks (intriguing as they are), but rather the promise of its pragmatism and meaningful practice. Many legitimate practitioners have contributed to the advancement of applied behavioural science in important ways, despite lacking a Master's degree or Doctorate. Therefore, the doors of any professional association should be open to both academics and noted practitioners alike. Additionally, those who aspire to consolidate their knowledge and skills by undertaking one of an increasing number of accredited short programmes in applied behavioural science like Columbia University's Behavioural Science in Business program and those offered by University College London and Warwick should also be warmly welcomed.

In addition to well-defined eligibility criteria for professional membership comprising either formal study in a behavioural science related subject or evidence of a relevant contribution to the applied field supported by the society's membership committee, any professional body should be properly constituted and underpinned by an agreed set of professional and ethical standards. Ethical standards in particular, can be hard to mandate; especially in contexts where there is an absence of clearly defined legal codes. Therefore, a willingness on the part of members to take responsibility for their own practice and align to an agreed set of society principles is required. The FORGOOD ethics framework (Lades & Delaney, 2019) sets out an applied ethical framework across seven dimensions including considerations of fairness, openness and respect, and constitutes a useful tool to determine what those principles should be. In the very least, there are good grounds for requiring that behavioural interventions improve the welfare (either captured by preferences or experiences) of the individuals who are being nudged to behave differently.

And what of the argument that the burgeoning interest in behavioural science could be a temporary one, therefore limiting the longer-term impact and need for a professional association? While this is possible, we believe it unlikely for an important reason. A significant proportion of challenges faced—be they specific to an organisation (like improving efficiency) or to a whole society (like climate change)—are, at

their heart, behavioural challenges. All the time this remains, bona fide behavioural scientists will, rightly, be in demand.

The Science Council is a U.K. based organisation concerned with the advancement and dissemination of knowledge and education in pure and applied sciences. It defines a professional society or association as "a body of individual members practicing a profession or occupation in which oversight of the knowledge, skills, conduct and practice of those professionals are maintained." (Science Council, 2020). We believe that a need exists for a Global Association of Applied Behavioural Scientists to rectify the current market failure, offer a means of differentiation to qualified practitioners and provide reassurance to those that commission advice. We also believe that the Science Council's definition of a professional body would be consistent with the spirit and goals of such an organisation.

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