Book review

How far to nudge? Assessing behavioural public policy

Peter Wells*

Sheffield Hallam University

In *How Far to Nudge* Peter John has written an outstanding introduction to the large and growing field of behavioural public policy. The central issue addressed by the book is the extent to which behaviour can contribute to the achievement of public goods. As such he understands behaviour within the wider setting of public policy making and the role that behaviour change may play in making public policy better at achieving desired outcomes. This wider view allows John to escape the often narrower lens of those who situate human action within a narrow behaviouralist and rational model of individual action. The key reference points for the book are the work of psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (see for example Kahneman, 2011) who advanced the area of decision making in psychology and who arguably then founded behavioural economics; Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler, two behavioural economists who published the international bestseller Nudge (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008); and more broadly institutional economists such as Elinor Ostrom who sought to situate the study of behaviours within an institutional framework for understanding collective action problems (Ostrom, 1990).

The book takes the reader through a history of nudge (chapter 1); the nature of behavioural and collective action problems (chapter 2); what John calls the behavioural revolution in social science (chapter 3); the history of the public policy agenda around nudge and its rise primarily in the UK (chapter 4); and some of the underpinnings of innovation in behaviour change (chapter 5). Much of the material covered in these first five chapters will be familiar to those who have followed debates around nudge and behavioural public policy over the last 20 years.

The major contribution of the book lies in the final four chapters. In chapter 6 John asks if nudge is 'all it is cracked up to be' which sets out some of the main limitations of the agenda. This theme is continued in chapter 7 around the ethics of nudge and in particular the advocacy and critique of nudge as a strategy in libertarian paternalism (see Wells, 2010). Chapter 8 then provides John's account of where the main benefits of nudge lie. The book concludes with some proposals as to where the future agenda for nudge may be (chapter 9). A major caveat in this review is that the book was originally published in 2018, two years before the pandemic, arguably the greatest stimulus to discussions around behavioural public policy. Nevertheless, it still contains much that is of relevance to current debates.

In tracing the rise of behavioural public policy, John focuses primarily on the influence of a particular and rather narrow set of key policy actors. These include the role of Sunstein and Thaler in popularising the ideas of nudge, and within the UK, key policy advisors such as David Halpern who currently leads the Behavioural Insights Team (a major UK based consultancy team which was spun out from the Cabinet Office), and who previously held senior advisory roles in the New Labour and Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition governments. As John makes clear this use of behavioural public policy draws on a relatively narrow set of 'nudges', such as the use of defaults, opt-ins and decision architecture. As John notes this set comes with disadvantages, ignoring the significance of institutional design, the role of context, the underplaying of effect duration and the wider concern that nudges can divert attention from the root causes of problems which may be due to structural-societal issues rather than flaws in individual behaviour. As John notes, someone facing poverty is likely to be under significant cognitive stress and not best placed to make 'rational choices'.

Peter John correctly highlights the links between the growth of behavioural public policy and the rise of the 'what works' agenda, and the requirement of the latter to establish quality standards for evidence, with the gold medal given to randomised control trials. As well as championing nudge within government, David Halpern has also played a major role advising government in the establishment of the What Works Centres, research clusters which commission trials and the synthesis of evidence on a range of policy areas including education, crime, ageing, local growth and youth unemployment. In taking this course, John neglects the work of behavioural scientists with a background in the discipline of psychology in the development of behavioural public policy. One of the most significant contributors in this area has been Susan Michie, especially around the understanding of behaviour in context, yet this work receives only a single mention in the book (Michie *et al.,* 2011).

Where the book is on its strongest footing is in chapter 8 where John makes four key assessments of the behavioural public policy agenda. The first is that nudges sometimes are most effective where there is a level of deliberation. This issue, where 'Think, Think' is advanced over 'Nudge, Nudge', is developed in John and colleagues' earlier article (John *et al.,* 2011), which in turn echoed John Dryzek's (2002) seminal contributions on deliberative democracy. A challenge here of course is that setting up the conditions for deliberation take time, something policy makers are often short of. Nonetheless, attempts in the UK and elsewhere to establish citizen assemblies to discuss responses to the climate emergency show how this approach may be gaining some traction, albeit at times without national government support.

The second point is that 'nudges' need to be understood in relation to a more significant policy intervention. An example here would be the roll out of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) as an intervention to allow people suffering mental health problems such as depression to have greater agency in their treatment pathway. Nudges have been used to give patients relevant evidence on the effectiveness of different approaches and on this basis a choice over how their own CBT is administered (e.g., through online, one-to-one or group-based sessions). As a result, their commitment to the treatment has been increased, and this has proved to be a key factor in determining the success of CBT.

The third consideration is around the role of context. He contrasts here the success of local level behaviour change interventions over large scale national programmes. The reason for this is that local leaders (designers of the nudges), whether in organisations such as charities or local authorities, are likely to be more trusted by the people targeted than national politicians or civil servants. This implication will be a familiar one to readers

of People, Place and Policy and its continued advocacy of local and placed-based approaches to policies which can be better attuned to local contextual factors.

The fourth area that Peter John explores are the weaknesses in elite decision-making models, and their significant contribution to policy failure as national politicians overstate the importance of short-term political success over long-term societal and economic impacts. Despite the role of a range of evidence (from experts to public opinion) elites tend to bring to the table and to continually rely on strong prior biases when making decisions.

In his conclusion, John highlights that behavioural public policy is based neither on full rational action nor on full ideological models of public policy making. He highlights that despite it being championed by the Cameron-led governments in the UK, it is not a policy of left or right. The interest at the highest levels of government waned in both the Theresa May and Donald Trump administrations. John has been keen to explore the role of nudge in the context of e-government and its potential to be an important tool in the roll out of major public policies (for example, to improve drug adherence amongst those requiring to maintain strict treatment regimes).

The Covid-19 pandemic has provided a major stimulus to policy, academic and public debate on the role of behavioural public policy. As a public health crisis, behavioural scientists have played key roles in informing policies and debate, most notably through the role of "SPI-B" (the Scientific Pandemic Influenza group on Behaviours), and this has brought to the fore a much wider array of approaches than are covered in Peter John's book. Although debates around behavioural public policy have moved on significantly since its pre-pandemic publication, *How Far to Nudge* will nonetheless continue to provide an important primer to the subject for some time to come.

*Correspondence address: Professor Peter Wells, Sheffield Hallam University, City Campus, Sheffield S1 1WB. Email: p.wells@shu.ac.uk

References

Dryzek, J.S. (2002) *Deliberative democracy and beyond: Liberals, critics, contestations.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

John, P., Smith, G. and Stoker, G. (2011) Nudge Nudge, Think Think: Two Strategies for Changing Civic Behaviour. *The Political Quarterly*, 80, 3, 361-370.

Kahneman, D. (2011) *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. London: Penguin.

Michie, S., van Stralen, M.M. and West, R. (2011) The behaviour change wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions. *Implementation Science*, 6, 42.

Ostrom, E. (1990) *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Thaler, R.H. and Sunstein, C. (2008) *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. Yale University Press.

Wells, P. (2010) A nudge one way, a nudge the other: libertarian paternalism as political strategy. *People, Place and Policy*, 4, 3, 111-118.