

A “Council of Psychological Science Advisers” Tackles Pressing Policy Issues

November 18, 2015



Some of the most urgent issues that American society faces today — including obesity, consumer debt, risk of terrorism, and climate change — are fundamentally influenced by decision making and behavior at both the individual and institutional levels. Despite this, policymakers have only recently begun to capitalize on insights from research in the behavioral sciences in developing policies that address these issues.

A [special section](#) in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#), underscores how findings from behavioral science can provide actionable solutions to societal problems.

The special section, edited by Bethany A. Teachman (University of Virginia), Michael I. Norton (Harvard University), and Outgoing Editor of *Perspectives on Psychological Science* Barbara A. Spellman (University of Virginia), features a [series of articles](#) intended to serve as policy memos to the President from a “Council of Psychological Science Advisers” – modeled on the existing Council of Economic Advisers. The articles review established findings and provide recommendations on a wide range of policy issues, including:

- Battling obesity by making healthy foods more accessible and convenient and integrating opportunities for physical activity throughout daily life
- Reducing teens’ risky behavior by promoting supervised after-school programming, later school start times, increased availability of prophylactics, and graduated driver licensing
- Encouraging responsible use of credit and debt by providing benefit recipients with real-time information about their balances and spending, restructuring credit card statements, and incentivizing debt repayment
- Improving education by teaching students that their intelligence can be developed and that they belong in an academic setting, and by increasing at-home support for early childhood education
- Promoting diverse institutions and organizations by establishing transparent criteria for recruitment, selection, and promotion procedures and creating tax and administrative incentives

for increasing organizational diversity

- Facilitating public engagement with climate change by emphasizing concrete and personal risks and promoting energy conservation as a social norm

The special section dovetails with President Obama's recent executive order directing federal agencies to inject more behavioral science into their activities and services. The order makes permanent the Social and Behavioral Sciences Team (SBST), a team of behavioral scientists that for the last year has been translating scientific findings into federal policy improvements.

"We believe that the current interest in behavioral science within government offers psychologists a new, more direct channel to influence public policy," Teachman, Norton, and Spellman write in their [introduction](#) to the special section.

The section also features commentaries from two of the foremost international leaders on the application of behavioral science to public policy: Cass Sunstein, a Professor at Harvard Law School and President Obama's Administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs from 2009 to 2012, and David Halpern, who leads the United Kingdom's Behavioural Insights Team.

"The articles in this issue span an exceptionally wide range; they offer valuable guidance that promises to improve people's lives," Sunstein [writes](#). "We are the earliest stages of uses of psychological research, not only to understand behavior, but also to adopt new initiatives to achieve widely shared goals."

As Halpern's experience with the Behavioural Insights Team demonstrates, science-based policy recommendations are already producing meaningful outcomes. "A wave of new results demonstrates that behaviorally or psychologically inspired policy interventions can have dramatic effects," he [writes](#). Halpern notes, as one example, that the UK's decision to change default options for workplace pension plans resulted in an additional 5 million people saving for retirement.

"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," Teachman, Norton, and Spellman conclude.

The [special section](#), including the introduction and accompanying commentaries, is available to the public online.