

Council of Psychological Science Advisers? It Could Happen...

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Advising policymakers on the creation and potential impact of new legislation typically has been the purview of economists — for example, the Council of Economic Advisers provides research-based advice to the President of the United States on domestic and international economic policy. However, much of the theory and research that people use to understand how individuals and institutions make economic decisions comes from the field of behavioral economics — a melding of psychological science and economics.

Given the role psychological science plays in a wide range of behaviors, it is surprising that psychologists don't have their own council advising the President — a Council of Psychological Science Advisers, so to speak. In an upcoming special section of *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, psychological scientists detail how research in their fields can inform public policy. Authors of these articles were asked to imagine that they were members of a fictional Council of Psychological Science Advisers, with the opportunity to write memos to the president detailing psychological-science-based solutions to societal problems.

These short articles review reliable established findings, are nonpartisan in nature, and are written to appeal to a broad audience that includes both academics and policymakers. The articles leverage psychological research to inform policy on topics such as battling obesity, encouraging the responsible use of credit and debt, and improving public engagement with climate change.

Outgoing *Perspectives* editor **Barbara A. Spellman** (University of Virginia) oversaw the special section with **Michael I. Norton** (Harvard University) and APS Fellow **Bethany A. Teachman** (University of Virginia). The editors issued an Open Call for Proposals in September 2014, and they received 222 submissions — more than four times the number of submissions they had expected. This interest, the authors wrote in an introduction to the special section, left “no doubt that psychologists are interested in policy applications of their science.”

For comment, the editors reached out to psychological scientist **David Halpern**, head of the United Kingdom's Behavioural Insights Team, a body which works to apply behavioral science to public policy.

“A wave of new results demonstrates that behaviorally or psychologically inspired policy interventions can have dramatic effects,” wrote Halpern in his commentary. As a case in point, he demonstrated, “There are already 5 million more savers as a result of the UK's 2012 decision to change the defaults on workplace pensions.” His essay highlights several additional success stories from the Behavioural Insights Team, such as the discovery that reminding tax debtors who owed more than \$50,000 that without tax revenue “the government could not pay for services such as schools and hospitals,” boosted payment by more than 43%.

The success of the Behavioural Insights Team in the United Kingdom may have influenced President Obama's decision to sign a September 15 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 which has been tasked since January 2014 with translating scientific findings into federal policy improvements.

Cass Sunstein, a Harvard law professor who from 2009 to 2012 advocated for the role of psychological science in government as President Obama's Administrator of the White House Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, also contributed a commentary to the latest *Perspectives* special section. Sunstein has praised President Obama's recent executive order as a step toward effective problem-solving in the federal government.

"The articles in this issue span an exceptionally wide range; they offer valuable guidance that promises to improve people's lives," Sunstein wrote in his *Perspectives* commentary. The special section will be published in the November 2015 issue of the journal.