

New Government Reports Showcase Behavioral Science

October 31, 2016

Dozens of collaborations between behavioral scientists and government agencies are on display in two new reports emanating from Washington, DC, and the United Kingdom.

Annual reports from the nascent Social and Behavioral Sciences Team (SBST) and the UK's Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) are now available online, and they reflect a rise in governments and businesses across the globe applying behavioral science to their operations.

The SBST was established in 2014, and in 2015, President Obama signed an executive order directing federal agencies to incorporate more behavioral science into their activities and services. As noted in the just-released 2015–2016 annual report, SBST's scope has expanded significantly within the past year to include 40 different collaborations with federal agency partners. Among these new programs, SBST collaborations showed that:

- developing an interactive “Community Action Deck” provided communities with evidence-based steps that help them meet specific goals for improving policing, in alignment with recommendations from the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing;
- scheduling a call for a specific appointment time to discuss a student loan default increased the call-in rate by 61% compared with an email emphasizing the consequences of inaction; and
- sending urban HIV patients in Mozambique an SMS reminder to take medications and attend doctor's appointments increased their likelihood of staying on the treatment and living longer. This was part of a collaboration with the United States Agency for International Development.

In a September 15 summit held in conjunction with the 2015–2016 report's release, officials lauded the team's work.

“Great policy only matters if it actually reaches people,” said Cecilia Muñoz, Assistant to the President and Director of the Domestic Policy Council. “Work from this group is where the policy rubber meets the road. The application of this set of ideas and this expertise can improve the lives of all Americans.”

The US government's intensified emphasis on behavioral science was significantly influenced by a 2013 White House workshop, “Psychological Science and Behavioral Economics in the Service of Public Policy,” which brought together psychological scientists, behavioral economists, and government leaders to discuss how to incorporate behavioral empiricism into policymaking. APS was an organizer of the event, along with the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, the National Institute on Aging, and the White House Council of Economic Advisers.

The 2013 workshop included presentations from some of the leading figures in psychological science, including APS William James Fellow and Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman; APS Past Presidents Walter Mischel, Susan T. Fiske, John T. Cacioppo, and Elizabeth A. Phelps; APS Past Board Members Barbara L.

Fredrickson and Elke U. Weber; and APS Fellows Laura L. Carstensen, Robert B. Cialdini, Jennifer S.

Lerner, Eldar Shafir, and Stephen J. Suomi.

The SBST was inspired in part by the UK's BIT, which former Prime Minister David Cameron commissioned in 2010 to test public-policy interventions through randomized controlled trials. The BIT is now a company jointly owned by its employees, the UK government, and the London-based charity Nesta.

Among the highlights in the company's latest report are results from a set of trials conducted in collaboration with renowned academics such as psychological scientists Geoffrey Cohen of Stanford University, Angela L. Duckworth of the University of Pennsylvania, and Todd Rogers of Harvard University. Those control trials, involving 10,000 students across 19 colleges, test the efficacy of interventions designed to foster perseverance and persistence. Early results show the interventions boosted attendance rates by nearly 4 percentage points. More details on achievement, attitudes, and other outcomes will be reported next year. BIT projects also demonstrated that:

- informing doctors that they are prescribing more antibiotics relative to 80% of their medical peers resulted in 73,000 fewer unnecessary prescriptions, helping to address the threat of antimicrobial resistance;
- getting police dispatchers to pause slightly before answering calls led to a significant drop in inappropriate calls (i.e., those that were more appropriate for a different government service agency); and
- sending text-message reminders to citizens who in previous years had been late paying their taxes increased on-time payment rates by nearly 50%.

Over the past year, the BIT has expanded its presence globally, setting up offices in Singapore and New York City and providing support for behavioral trials in Costa Rica, Poland, Australia, and most recently Mexico and Moldova.

What's more, the company's interventions are growing in both scale and complexity, involving an escalating number of citizens, BIT Chief Executive and psychological scientist David Halpern and Managing Director Owain Service report.

"The typical sample size of our trials is now often in the tens of thousands, and sometimes bigger," Halpern and Service write in the report's executive summary. "And the interventions reported often involve more complex psychological ideas, or more involved partnerships to deliver them." æ

APS Past President Walter Mischel will speak at the 2nd International Convention of Psychological Science, 23–25 March 2017, in Vienna, Austria. Todd Rodgers will speak at the 2017 APS Annual Convention, May 25–28, 2017, in Boston, Massachusetts.