

ANNUAL LSE BEHAVIOURAL PUBLIC POLICY LECTURE

Getting lost in a field: a personal history of the development of behavioural public policy

Adam Oliver

Department of Social Policy, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK
Email: a.j.oliver@lse.ac.uk

(Received 12 December 2024; accepted 12 December 2024)

Abstract

This essay is a write-up of my Professorial Inaugural Lecture, delivered at the London School of Economics on 9 December 2024. Herein, I describe how I became involved and have helped develop the field of behavioural public policy (BPP). I detail how the intellectual architecture of BPP – its journal, Annual International Conference and Association – came into existence, and allude to my hopes for how the field might develop as we go forward.

Keywords: Autobiography; autonomy; freedom; Liberty; Paternalism

Early interests

Over the past 15 years, behavioural public policy (hereafter BPP) has become an established field of public policy, with its own dedicated journals, conferences and associations. In this essay, mindful of the quote, rightly or wrongly attributed to Winston Churchill, that history will be kind to me for I shall write it, I will reflect on my own personal contribution to these endeavours.

As an undergraduate student at the University of East Anglia, Bob Sugden introduced me to some concepts that are central to behavioural economics, and his enthusiasm for the material was infectious.¹ So much so that when I undertook a postgraduate degree at the University of York I gravitated towards a course in experimental economics, taught by John Hey and Bob's collaborator in developing regret and disappointment theories, Graham Loomes.²

Soon after completing my MSc, I was awarded a Monbusho Fellowship to study at Keio University in Tokyo. The Fellowship was intended for me to undertake research in health economics and policy, but there was little oversight and monitoring,

¹Bob and his colleagues – including Chris Starmer, who was then finishing his PhD – used the term experimental economics rather than behavioural economics at that time.

²While enrolled at the University of York I wrote a summer dissertation at Erasmus University Rotterdam, where Han Bleichrodt also influenced my interests and thinking.

which afforded me the opportunity to consolidate my behavioural economics reading. This proved useful, because it later helped me to pursue a PhD in the subject matter at Newcastle University, under the supervision of Graham (who had in the interim moved to Newcastle) and the late (great) Mike Jones-Lee.

Having lived for a few years in London and Tokyo, in Newcastle I felt like a hamster in a jam jar and stayed for only eight months. I took a position in a private pharmaceutical policy research group (while continuing my PhD part-time), but I was ill suited to the role, a view I think shared by all concerned. In January 2001, encouraged by Julian Le Grand, I joined the London School of Economics (LSE), where I have been ever since.³

On completion, my PhD comprised of articles that tested the axioms of rational choice theory over health outcomes. To complete that circle, Bob Sugden served as my external examiner. During the noughties, much of my work was focussed upon health policy reform-related issues, and I helped to establish several conferences, groups and a journal in that space, but the area that continued to interest me the most was the testing of behavioural economic-related phenomena in the health domain. My hope was to bring behavioural economics further to the fore in health economics and policy, and to that end I examined and published on a wide range of behavioural economic phenomena, all within the context of health.

However, throughout the noughties my policy interests extended increasingly beyond health, and my intellectual focus was heavily conceptual. Therefore, when it seemed like the whole world suddenly gained an interest in how behavioural science might be applied to policy, I was well positioned to contribute to the discourse.

The birth of BPP

The explosion of policy interest in behavioural science at the end of the noughties was due to a confluence of circumstances. Specifically, the 2007–2008 financial crisis motivated many to search beyond orthodox neoclassical economics for explanations as to what could have gone wrong and what might be done better. Relatedly, the public sector budgets in many countries were suddenly emptied, which sent policy makers on a search for relatively cheap wins. Their search led them to Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein's recently published book, *Nudge*, which appeared to offer the promise of such possibilities (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008).⁴ And perhaps most importantly in terms of policy impact, David Cameron, soon after being elected Prime Minister in 2010, established the Behavioural Insights Team, the first time a team dedicated to the implications of behavioural science for policy had sat at the heart of government anywhere in the world.

As aforementioned, my longstanding interests and contributions qualified me to contribute to these new developments. Others at the LSE also took an interest. In early 2010, Julian Le Grand proposed that he, with my help, develop a new postgraduate

³Rupert Gill, until recently a senior UK civil servant, told me that I have the best job in the world. It is hard to disagree.

⁴David Cameron, as leader of the opposition in the UK, requested that his parliamentary colleagues add *Nudge* to their 2009 summer reading list.

course in this space, and at a teachers' meeting we endeavoured to settle on a name for it. Several suggestions were offered by the staff there present – for instance, 'behavioural economics and policy' and 'behavioural insights in policy'. Finally, 'behavioural public policy' was settled upon. That was the first time that I had heard the phrase, and the name stuck. Hundreds of postgraduate students have now been taught BPP at the LSE, and in recent years the course has been extended to undergraduates.

The success we had in establishing the BPP course prompted Julian and I, with Patrick Dunleavy, to approach the LSE's external relations department to ask if they would fund a series of seminars led by some of the world's leading behavioural scientists. They agreed, which resulted in a monthly seminar over the 2010–2011 academic year in which scholars including Bruno Frey, George Loewenstein, Drazen Prelec, Matthew Rabin and Paul Slovic presented their ideas and work to an audience of academics and policy makers.

The outputs of the seminar series were published as an edited collection in 2013 (Oliver, 2013). It served several purposes. For instance, its title – *Behavioural Public Policy* – signalled the name of this new field. The book also initiated a relationship with Cambridge University Press (CUP), who have supported the general development of BPP. Having policy officials partake in the seminar series was an important early attempt at bringing academic and policy makers together to share their challenges, experiences and knowledge. And the book was our first link to the then Head of the UK Civil Service, Gus O'Donnell, who had earlier been instrumental in the creation of the Behavioural Insights Team, and who has since been a crucial source of support for every BPP initiative that I have been involved in.

Fuelled by the success of the seminar series, my thoughts turned towards what I saw as a gap that ought to be filled if BPP were to be a recognised field: its own dedicated journal.

The intellectual architecture

The journal, *Behavioural Public Policy*, had a long gestation. To gain traction with a publisher, at a time when publishers were circumspect about creating new journals, I needed prominent international scholars to agree to join the Editorial Board. I therefore approached George Akerlof and Cass Sunstein, who had been supportive of the outputs of the BPP seminar series, to ask if they would agree to join me as co-editors of the prospective journal. Both were open to the idea, but George initially thought that it would be better to try to secure a dedicated section of an established journal for our purposes. Cass and I managed to persuade him that there was space and a thirst for an entirely new outlet.

With support and advice from Patrick McCartan and Hannah Patrick at CUP, our proposal for a new journal was sent to 14 anonymous reviewers in 2015. Thirteen reviewers were positive about the proposal, and one was negative. There thus was an unusual degree of consensus on the merits of the initiative. The first issue of *Behavioural Public Policy* – now the world's leading BPP field journal and among the top journals in both public administration and applied psychology – was published in 2017.

After establishing the journal, my attention turned to other aspects of intellectual architecture that are necessary for a body of thought to be classified as a dedicated

field. Among those was an annual international gathering, open to academics and policy makers. This led to the creation of the Annual International Behavioural Public Policy Conference, which was initially meant to launch at the LSE in September 2020, but due to the pandemic was delayed to September 2022. The Annual Conference has proven to be a great success, with its second iteration hosted by the University of North Carolina, the third by Cambridge University, and the fourth by King's College London, with future editions planned for Brisbane, Singapore and Copenhagen. Also in 2022, to serve as the final cornerstone on which to build the field, the International Behavioural Public Policy Association (IBPPA: www.ibppa.org) was established. The IBPPA is a community of those who share an interest in how to apply the findings of behavioural science to policy.

There is now a multitude of additional ongoing initiatives that illustrate the vibrancy of BPP as a field. For example, since 2017 there has been an Annual LSE BPP Lecture, delivered by, among others, Cass, Julian, Nick Chater, George Loewenstein, Lucia Reisch and Mario Rizzo; the virtual BPP seminar series, with each seminar led by a global leader in the field; the LSE-funded BPP Exchange Group, which brings together at regular workshops academics and the behavioural leads at government departments, international agencies and private corporations; regular annual BPP symposia at the National University of Singapore and one that rotates annually between the LSE and Cambridge University, and also one-off BPP workshops hosted or planned in Mexico City, Tbilisi, Tokyo and elsewhere. These initiatives are only those that I am personally involved in; there are many more besides. BPP is now an established field and its future is secure.

The future

When Richard and Cass first published their book, *Nudge*, their soft paternalistic approach to public policy, aiming to encourage behaviour change without coercion, was, to me, quite attractive. However, I soon began to question the ability of policy makers to discern what people want from their own lives, given the multifarious interpersonal and, across time and place, intrapersonal desires that people have. Although soft- and hard-paternalistic approaches to BPP ought to be respected and debated, and, indeed, will still be debated a thousand years from now, there is a need to also consider more liberal perspectives. With this in mind, I wrote a trilogy of books for CUP on the origins, development and my personal preference for the future of the field (Oliver, 2017, 2019, 2023). My hope is that these books will serve as a foundation for a liberal approach to BPP. They were also meant to serve as a signal that I can contribute substantively to the scholarship and not just to the intellectual architecture of the field, because if I have not contributed to scholarship, I fear that I have failed academically.

It will therefore be clear that I believe that those who work in BPP should never lose sight of the importance of individual autonomy; that if we are not substantively harming others, we ought to be the authors of our own lives. With this in mind, one might usefully turn to Joseph Raz, who wrote that the '... conditions of autonomy ... consist of three distinct components: appropriate mental abilities, an adequate range of options, and independence' (Raz, 1986, p. 372).⁵ These three conditions – i.e. providing the right

⁵By independence, Raz meant freedom from manipulation and coercion.

conditions for people to be best placed to make choices for themselves, widening the choice or opportunity set, and regulating against unacceptable harm-inducing manipulation and coercion - offer enormous scope for policy intervention under a liberal political economy of BPP (for an elaboration, see Oliver, 2023).

I will continue my endeavours to contribute to BPP activities and scholarship, but lest I have given the impression that the path taken thus far has been smooth and even, I must make clear that it has at times been strewn with jagged rocks. At the LSE, Minouche Shafik and, particularly, Tim Besley gave me some suitable walking boots, and in 2023 I was appointed to the world's first Professorship in Behavioural Public Policy. My hope is that there will soon be many more.

References

- Oliver, A. (Ed.) (2013), *Behavioural Public Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oliver, A. (2017), *The Origins of Behavioural Public Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oliver, A. (2019), *Reciprocity and the Art of Behavioural Public Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oliver, A. (2023), *A Political Economy of Behavioural Public Policy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Raz, J. (1986), *The Morality of Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thaler, R. H. and C. R. Sunstein (2008), *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness*. New Haven: Yale University Press.