

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW  
ABOUT INCORPORATING  
BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE  
INTO PUBLIC RELATIONS:  
**A PRIMER**



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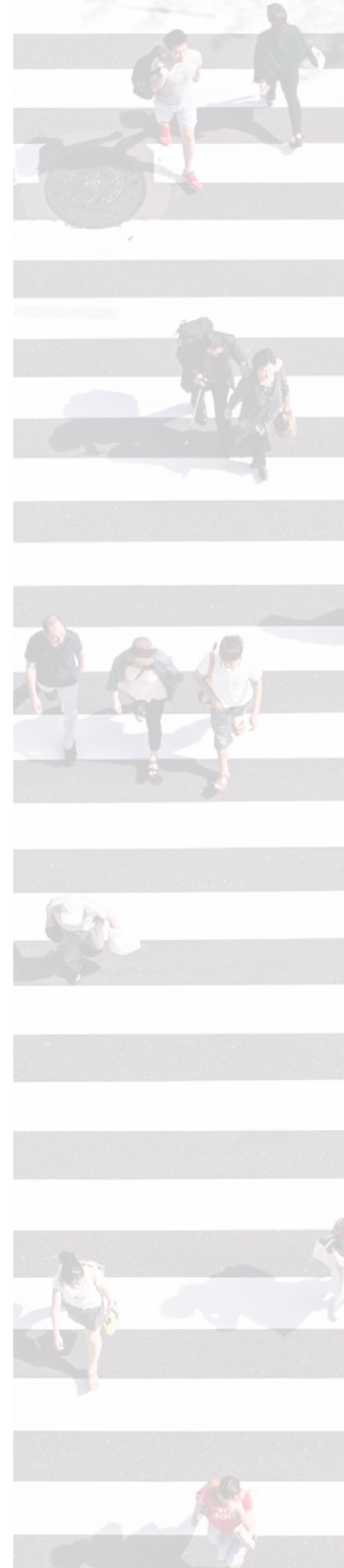
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The science beneath the art of public relations™

# WHAT IS BEHAVIOURAL SCIENCE?

Behavioural science aims to understand human behaviour and decision-making. It encompasses disciplines examining the psychological underpinnings of behaviour, such as cognition, neuroscience and social psychology, and how they intersect with fields involving behaviour, like economics, politics, and communication.

By taking an interdisciplinary approach, behavioural scientists incorporate multiple facets of behaviour with rigorous empirical methods to develop a more complete picture of why we act the way we do.

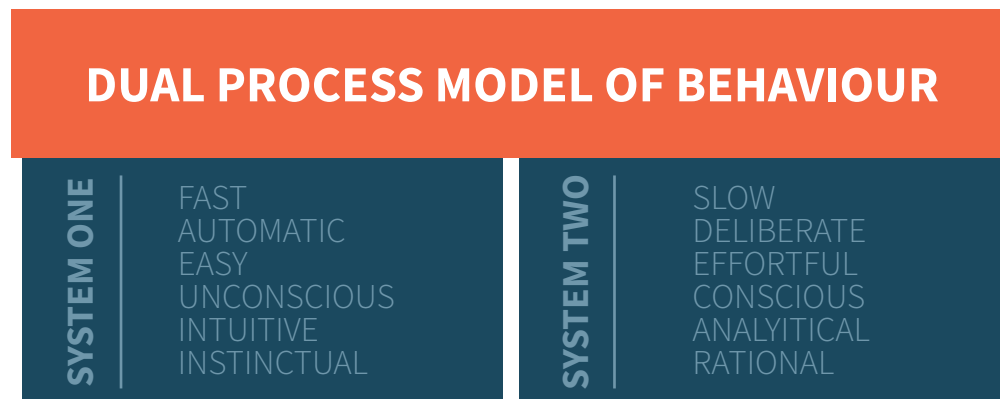




## SYSTEM 1 VS SYSTEM 2

An important theory in behavioural sciences is the dual process model of behaviour. According to psychologist and economist Daniel Kahneman in *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (2011), this model breaks decision-making into two distinct processes - System 1, which is fast, easy, and unconscious, and System 2, which is slow, effortful, and deliberate (Kahneman, 2011). Most decisions people make fall under the System 1 category.

System 1 saves us time and energy by making behaviour automatic and unconscious, while System 2 enables us to carefully evaluate all the available information to make rational decisions. Both systems are important in the decision-making process to respond to different circumstances based on the amount of motivation, time, and energy that we have.



System 1 uses mental shortcuts, known as heuristics, which are effective and efficient most of the time. However, they also can lead to systematic and predictable errors, known as cognitive biases. Examinations of these heuristics and biases paved the way for the field of behavioural economics, where psychology research has been used to revise understandings of economic behaviour.

## BEHAVIOURAL ECONOMICS AND "NUDGES"

Behavioural economics is one area within behavioural sciences that examines the psychological underpinnings of behaviour within the context of economic decisions. Critically, it examines why people don't always behave according to predictions of classical economic models, which suggest behaviour should be rational, self-interested, and based on evaluations of utilities, costs, and probabilities. Concepts like dual processing, heuristics, and cognitive biases help explain why reality often deviates from economic theory, as observed naturally and in experimental settings.

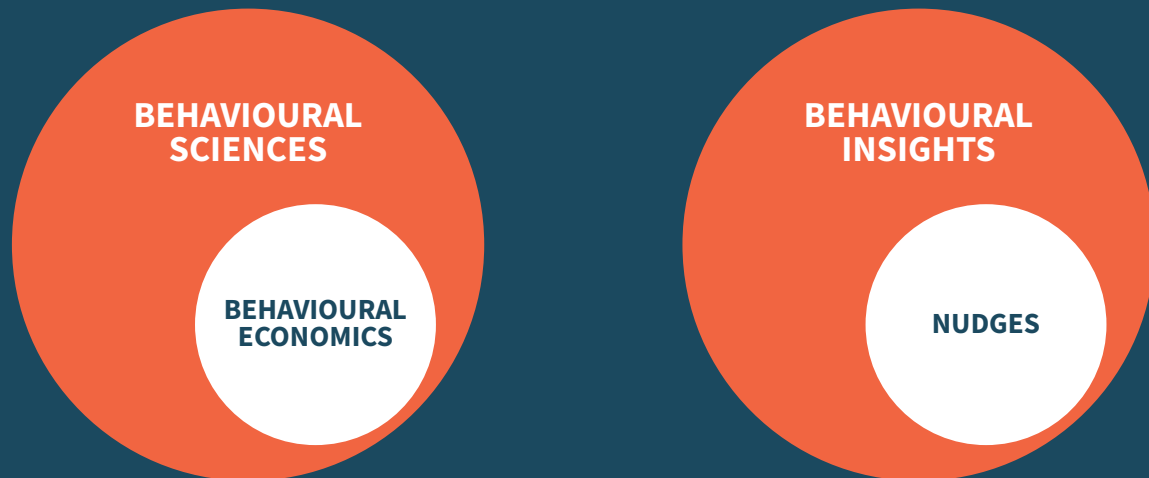


In the late 20th century, researchers Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky examined how heuristics could lead to irrational decisions in uncertain situations and developed cognitive models for behaviour that differed from those in the field of economics. Based on this research, economist Richard Thaler further developed the notion that humans are not rational beings and often behave counter to classical economic theory. Thaler and legal scholar Cass Sunstein went on to propose that behavioural economics could be applied to influence behaviour through what they referred to as nudges (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009).

Nudges are small interventions that encourage particular behaviours without the use of financial incentives or infringing on people's autonomy. To maintain people's freedom to make their own decision (also known as libertarian paternalism), choices are not limited. Instead, nudges change the environment that decisions are made in, such as the ways choices or information are presented, commonly referred to as the choice architecture, to align unconscious and instinctive behaviours with desirable outcomes. The goal of nudges is make decision-making easier by leveraging the cognitive biases that would otherwise lead people to act irrationally, against their own intentions or best interests.

## BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS

Nudges are an example of behavioural insights, the application of behavioural science understandings to real-world problems. The term originated with the UK's Behavioural Insights Team, which was one of the first groups established to apply nudge theory to public policy.

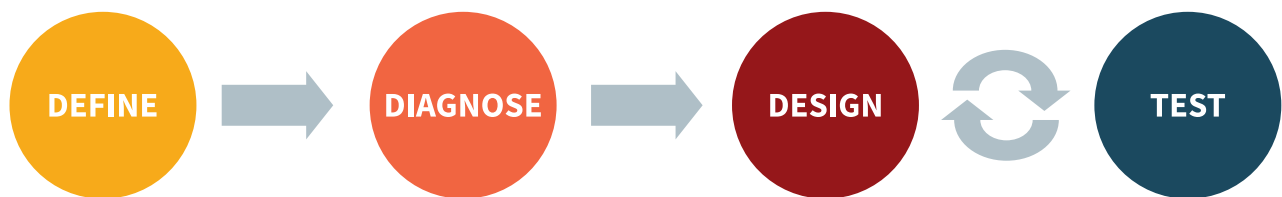


Governments recognized the potential to apply behavioural economics to encourage behaviours like compliance for tax and fine payments, without having to introduce more restrictive laws and regulations (Behavioural Insights Team, 2014). Other sectors have since introduced nudges and other behavioural insights, like narrative persuasion, to account for the complexity of human behaviour and be more successful at influencing it. Findings from behavioural sciences like psychology have long been applied to solve real-world problems. However, the rise of behavioural insights embraces not only the concepts and theories established by research, but also the rigorous empirical and iterative methods.

A defining feature of behavioural insights application today is the evidence-based approach to creating interventions to influence behaviour. The spirit of experimentation and empirical rigor respects the complexity of human behaviour. Research and testing inform the entire developmental process to ensure that strategies are appropriate and effective.

When people think about behavioural insights, they often think of randomized control trials (RCTs). In an RCT, randomly assigned control and treatment groups are compared to determine an intervention's impact. They are a valuable tool because they help establish causality between the intervention and behavioural change. However, there are many other research methods that are used in the development of interventions, such as surveys, interviews, field observations, A/B testing, and quasi-experiments.

One example of how the development of behavioural insights can be approached is the following four stage process:



Adapted from (Datta & Mullainathan, 2014).

In this method, the first step is to define the problem, understanding the broader context it exists in and establishing goals for the intervention, specifically the desired behavioural outcomes and how they can be measured.

A diagnosis of the situation then identifies the challenges to the intended behavioural change, such as cognitive biases, and the opportunities to leverage psychological principles to overcome them.

Based on these opportunities, potential techniques for behavioural change, like nudges, are considered and developed further in the design stage.

Once an intervention is designed, it needs to be rigorously tested to examine whether or not it is effective in the real world. Using pilot studies, interventions can be tested with samples of the target audience. Developing implementations of behavioural insights is an iterative process, so the results of the testing are used to further refine or reorient the design before scaling up.



## BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Communications can fail if they fail to recognize that human behaviour is greatly influenced by unconscious psychological processes in response to both internal factors like emotion or cognitive strain, and external factors like the environment. Behavioural insights provide communicators with tools enhance the impact of their work by applying more realistic models of human behaviour built upon decades of psychological research.

Many of the strategies from behavioural insights are already part of the public relations repertoire. However, the behavioural sciences now provide the empirical evidence and frameworks for understanding why they work. Grounding these strategies within the study of behavioural sciences helps public relations professionals recognize the impact of cognitive biases and learn to mitigate them or use them to their advantage. It also emphasizes the importance of rigorously testing ideas and using evidence to inform and revise strategies. This critical thinking approach can help public relations evaluate assumptions and become more effective in this ever-changing business environment.

The introduction of behavioural insights to public relations has been relatively new, compared to other sectors like public policy or marketing. However, it holds great promise for the future. In addition to interventions that improve the behavioural impact of communication strategies and campaigns, behavioural insights can be applied to how we think about our profession.

Research has begun to apply behavioural theories to decision-making within public relations. For example, cognitive biases can help explain why crisis communicators sometimes choose short-sighted and suboptimal responses, despite awareness and plans for better approaches (Claeys & Coombs, 2019). As a result of time constraints and stress, communicators often rely on intuition, which can be biased by loss aversion and a focus on short-term outcomes over long-term ones. By trying to mitigate immediate reputational damage, instead of looking at the big picture, they ignore evidence-based best practices.

Moving forward, public relations can begin to establish guidelines, standards, and practices for incorporating behavioural insights research.

## THE ETHICS OF BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS

Any attempt to influence others' behaviours warrants serious ethical considerations, especially when it comes to behavioural insights that act on unconscious decision-making processes. Public relations professionals need to be aware of the potential for misuse, which is not only unethical, but also threatens reputation and the trust established with publics.

In particular, the rise in popularity of nudges has prompted criticism that they can be manipulative and used to lead people to undesired desired behaviour. Thaler outlined three guiding principles in their work on nudges to ensure that they are designed to be beneficial for everyone (2015):

- 1. Nudges should be transparent and never misleading**
- 2. Opting out of a nudge should be as easy as possible**
- 3. Nudges should encourage behaviours that improve the welfare of those being nudged**

When nudges violate these principles, they are often referred to as sludge (Thaler, 2018). Instead of helping people make better decisions, they make desirable behaviours more difficult and therefore less likely, or encourage behaviours that go against people's intentions.

When discussing the ethics of nudges, Sunstein argues that choice architecture is always present - any way choices are presented can influence the decision-making process (2015). The central purpose of nudging, as Thaler and Sunstein have described it, should be to help people make better decisions. Transparency and maintaining people's agency is paramount. People may not always agree on whether the behaviours being nudged are better, but they should always have the freedom to choose or scrutinize the nudge application.

Ethical considerations also need to be kept in mind during the development process of behavioural insights interventions. The collection, analysis, and



storage of behavioural data should be transparent and respect peoples' privacy and agency. Employing an iterative evaluation process ensures that unintended outcomes are addressed and the benefits of the interventions are substantiated.

Behavioural insights in public relations should conform to the ethical and professional standards of the practice. While the concept of behavioural insights may be new, the strategies that emerge from them have been used by communicators for a long time, both within and outside of the public relations industry. The study of behavioural sciences provides an understanding of how different communication strategies work on a psychological level. In doing so, it provides us with opportunities to make our work more effective and prompts us to reflect on the ethical implications.

## COMPARISONS WITH DATA SCIENCE

Data science is the scientific analysis of data to understand a particular topic and incorporate a wide range of disciplines like statistics and computer science. It allows us to observe patterns and trends in data using sophisticated analytical tools that we may not see otherwise.

While data science is often employed to analyze behavioural data to inform policy and strategy in many sectors, it differs from behavioural sciences, which provides an interpretation of data through the lens of psychological concepts. Whereas data sciences can be used effectively to forecast future results based on past trends, behavioural sciences provides the understanding to change behavioural outcomes. In essence, behavioural insights are often a means for acting on the findings that emerge from data analyses.

These two fields are tightly intertwined through the importance of empirical methods. Data science contributes to both the study of behavioural sciences and their application.

Within the developmental process of behavioural interventions, data science supports the research needed to define and diagnose the problem. It is also

critical for the evaluation of interventions. Using tools from data science makes it easier to conduct tests on multiple iterations of an intervention with different target audiences. As interventions are implemented and scaled up, the ability to process complex and larger data sets, commonly referred to as "big data", enables the efficient evaluation of outcomes.

The growth of data science through machine learning and advanced algorithms changes the landscape of behavioural sciences and creates new opportunities for applying behavioural insights in the real world.



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