

DIVISION OF BEHAVIORAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES AND EDUCATION

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## USING SOCIAL SCIENCE TO INFORM POLICY: ROBERT CIALDINI ON WHAT MOTIVATES PEOPLE



Social and Behavioral Sciences In Action, an initiative of the Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education (DBASSE) of the National Research Council, aims to highlight intriguing findings from the social and behavioral sciences that can contribute to government policies, public health, and economic progress. As part of this initiative, DBASSE organized a discussion with congressional staffers on Nov. 12, 2013, to share policy-relevant research on what motivates people – insights that have already improved policies and practices in areas such as energy conservation and health care, and which could yield greater benefits with wider application.

“We know that a lot of you are being asked to do more with less, and we think there’s a way to do that – by having better access to science,” said Arthur Lupia, Hal R. Varian professor of political science at the University of Michigan, who opened and moderated the session. “Today, in fact, many government decision makers use social science to improve their decisions.” For example, findings from economics and psychology have guided military procurement strategies, helping get supplies to battlefields quickly and effectively. Other findings have aided doctors’ efforts to provide better advice to their patients, and spurred changes in retirement plans that made it easier for more people to save – making them less reliant on government in their retirement. “All of this coming from basic and applied social science, conducted at colleges and universities in every state,” said Dr. Lupia.

## WHAT MOTIVATES PEOPLE?

Robert Cialdini, Regents' Emeritus Professor of Psychology and Marketing at Arizona State University, presented his research on factors that influence whether people will act on a message they hear. Government often relies on regulation and economic incentives when seeking to motivate people to act, he explained. However, knowledge from the social sciences adds another set of tools, approaches that cost less than offering economic incentives and entail fewer costs in social capital than regulation. In particular, six universal principles of social influence can help in policymaking, explained Dr. Cialdini. Incorporating one or more of these factors into a message significantly increases the probability that people will assent to and cooperate with a measure:

- **Reciprocation.** People say “yes” to those whom they owe.
- **Scarcity.** Stressing the unique advantages of a policy or opportunity being offered, as well as emphasizing what a person will lose if they forgo it, will increase the likelihood of action.
- **Authority.** People want to follow the lead of legitimate experts, which means those with both knowledge/experience and trustworthiness.
- **Friendship/liking.** Not surprisingly, people are more likely to say “yes” to people they know and like. Identifying a commonality is a way to build that rapport.
- **Commitment and consistency.** People try to act in ways that are consistent with what they have already said and done. In addition, it is more likely that a person will live up to a commitment if it is actively made, publicly made, voluntarily made, and written down.

- **Consensus or social proof.** People like to follow the lead of others around them and those who are like them.

## THE PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL INFLUENCE IN ACTION: TWO EXAMPLES

Dr. Cialdini described real-world applications of these principles, explaining how they helped to reduce no-shows at health clinics in the United Kingdom and to motivate U.S. customers to conserve energy.



**Reducing no-shows for medical appointments.** The UK's Behavioral Insights Unit drew upon two principles when trying to solve the problem of patients not showing up for their scheduled appointments at government-supported clinics:

- **Commitment and consistency.** At the end of each appointment, the receptionist, instead of writing down the date and time of the next appointment, instead asked the patient to write it down. This step, a form of written commitment, led to an 18 percent reduction in no-shows.
- **Consensus or social proof.** Signs in the waiting room, which noted the number of patients who failed to attend appointments, were changed to instead inform patients about the percentage of people who were attending on time – for example, “95 percent of our patients made their appointments in this practice last month.” This led to a 31 percent drop in no-shows.

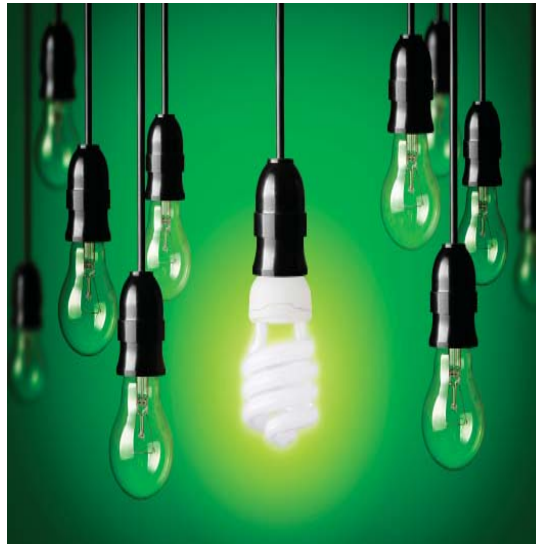
After the study was over, the clinic staff reversed these steps, and no-shows went up again. Then they implemented the steps again, and once again the no-shows dropped. These approaches were costless, honest, and effective, but they were not typical practice, said Dr. Cialdini.

### **Motivating people to conserve energy.**

A recent effort to spur energy conservation in the U.S. has also harnessed the principle of consensus or social proof, based in research by Dr. Cialdini's team. The research team went door-to-door in California, asking people which reasons to conserve energy they found most motivating. Most pointed to protecting the environment and conserving for the sake of future generations, while the fewest said it was important to conserve energy because their neighbors were doing so. Their behavior told a different story, however. When the researchers distributed door hangers urging consumers to conserve energy for various reasons, the only message that prompted significant action to conserve energy was a message that their neighbors were already taking such steps.

A private company called OPOWER leveraged this research to motivate consumers around the United States to conserve energy. After approaching Dr. Cialdini's team for help formulating a business plan, OPOWER worked with utilities to send customers a monthly report describing their energy use compared to their neighbors'. This approach has reduced U.S. energy consumption around the country by 3 billion kilowatt hours, CO2 emissions by 5 bil-

lion pounds, and saved consumers \$355 million in energy costs. (More information and up-to-date statistics on energy saved can be found at [opower.com](http://opower.com).)



### **PERSPECTIVES FROM FORMER LEGISLATORS**

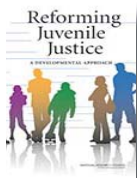
In closing presentations, former congresswoman Nancy Johnson and former congressman Brian Baird offered their own views on the role of behavioral and social sciences in policy. Congresswoman Johnson pointed to her experience on the House Ways and Means Committee, which changed pension law because of social and behavioral science research. By shifting from an "opt in" to

an "opt out" structure for pension plan enrollment, participation went from 30 percent to 80 percent. "Knowing what moves people is extraordinarily important," she said.

Rep. Baird noted that as policy makers try to solve problems, research presented at the session and other social science studies reveals that relying on "common sense" can sometimes lead to "solutions" that either don't solve the problems as well as they could or in some cases make things worse. On the other hand, well-designed social science research can reveal ways in which public policy can be much more effective, often with substantial savings to taxpayers. Rep. Baird suggested that just as representatives ask the Congressional Budget Office to assess the financial impacts of policy, elected representatives and their staffs should also ask the question, "What would social science tell us about how to design this program?"

## REPORTS

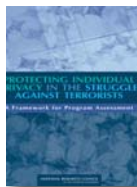
Hundreds of National Research Council reports that recommend ways to apply scientific evidence to policy can be downloaded free of charge from the National Academies Press website at <http://nap.edu>. The following are examples:



*Reforming Juvenile Justice: A Developmental Approach* takes an in-depth look at evidence on adolescent development and ways to respond effectively to adolescent offending.



*U.S. Health in International Perspective: Shorter Lives, Poorer Health* examines evidence on the health and longevity gap Americans face compared to people in other high-income nations, explores possible explanations for this shortfall, and recommends actions to address the U.S. health disadvantage.



*Protecting Individual Privacy in the Struggle Against Terrorists: A Framework for Program Assessment* offers a framework that government agencies with counterterrorism programs that collect or “mine” personal data — such as phone, medical, and travel records — can use to assess existing programs and to determine the likely impact of new programs.

**For More Information . . .** This brief was prepared by the Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education (DBASSE) of the National Research Council as part of the Social and Behavioral Sciences in Action (SBSIA) initiative with the goal of rising awareness of the vitality, validity, and value of the social and behavioral sciences to the scientific enterprise, to public policy, and to the nation’s well-being, and to distill lessons for future priorities for the field. The initiative will highlight ways these sciences can help identify solutions to some of our nation’s most pressing challenges to research, policy, and practice. SBSIA provides timely, relevant information to a range of audiences — government agencies, Congress, scientists, universities and others — through public events and educational activities. More information on Dr. Cialdini’s research and on Social and Behavioral Sciences in Action can be found at <http://www.sbs-in-action.org> or by contacting 202-334-2300. The views contained in this brief are those of the individual participants and not of the National Research Council. Sponsored by SAGE and the Henry and Bryna David Endowment, the event described in this brief was hosted by the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences, as part of a new series of events to highlight intriguing new findings from the social and behavioral sciences that can improve government policy.

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