Behavourial sciences have sparkled considerable interest among policy-makers.

Can you tell us how this discipline has informed policies?

Behavioural sciences are increasingly used to inform policies at all levels (EU, national, regional and local). Since the psychologist Daniel Kahneman won the Nobel Prize in economics in 2002 and the book "Nudge" was published in 2008, policy-makers now realise that they should investigate citizen’s decision-making processes, because these are not always as rational as they expected. Historically, behavioural economics are the most influential discipline in this field, but social psychology and cognitive psychology now also regularly provide evidence taken on board by policy makers. Insights from behaviourial sciences can help designing more efficient policies, testing different policy options before scaling them out, and evaluating their actual impacts.

Given the historic prominence of behavioural economics, EU policy makers initially used behavioural insights to inform consumer protection policies. For instance, in 2009, the European Commission proposed in its Consumer Rights Directive to ban pre-checked boxes in online contracts (the kind you would get when you booked a flight online, where additional services such as travel insurance were selected unless you actively un-checked the boxes). This proposal was explicitly based on scientific evidence showing that consumers often tend to stick to the default, due to the so-called "status quo bias". Another area where the European Commission has increasingly used behavioural insights is product labelling regulation (what behavioural economists call "information disclosure"). Behavioural experiments were carried out to test different ways to present health warnings on cigarettes packages or energy labels on appliances in order to encourage sustainable consumer choices, and the findings were translated into regulation. More applications of behaviourial insights at the European Commission can be found [here](#).

Member States also follow suit. Policy areas using behavioural evidence at national level are as diverse as employment, finance, taxation, environment and health. One classic example of "behaviourally aligned" policies (policies that a posteriori can be considered as in line with findings from behavioural sciences) is the penalty points system for driving offences put in place in various Member States. These schemes implicitly leverage our tendency to prefer avoiding losses (of points, in this case) rather than receiving equivalent gains. In early 2016, the Joint Research Centre published a report and [country-specific factsheets](#) highlighting the wealth of national and regional policies explicitly or implicitly informed by behavioural insights.

Have behavioural sciences been applied by policy-makers to improve mental health and well-being?

To my knowledge, policy-makers in Europe have seldom explicitly used behavioural sciences
in this context. The influence has been more implicit or restricted to policies related to psychological support for vulnerable groups. However, given the inherent behavioural component of mental health and well-being policies, behavioural insights are likely to make a significant contribution for more effective, targeted outcomes. For instance, this discipline can help designing and testing different campaigns to change social norms regarding mental health care, or they can use commitment strategies to ensure that people suffering from mental illness go through their psychotherapeutic treatment. A recent report by UK’s Behavioural Insights Team specifically looks at potential contributions of behavioural insights for better health and well-being policies.

Despite the limited explicit use of behavioural sciences, there are however quite a few instances of behaviourally-informed policies indirectly tackling these issues by focusing on some of their determinants such as inequalities, discriminations, and physical health.

Unemployment has a large negative impact on subjective well-being of individuals. A few countries designed behaviourally-informed policies to help job seekers find a job. For instance, the UK Behavioural Insights Team showed that encouraging the unemployed to commit themselves to perform specific personalised job seeking activities significantly improves their chances of getting back to work. In Hungary, changing the negatively stereotyped name "unemployment benefit" to the more positive "job seekers benefits" also led to positive results.

Physical health is also correlated with well-being and mental health, and policies have been extensively informed by behavioural insights in this area. Encouraging healthy nutrition not only requires ensuring that consumers receive enough information regarding food nutritional properties, but also that this information is understandable and "digestible". This is particularly important for vulnerable consumers. For instance, the Estonian government introduced an interactive online salt calculator to help consumers understand better the salt content of different dishes. Along the same lines, various Member States tested (using behavioural experiments) and introduced labels on pre-packaged food items, such as traffic lights and scales, summarising nutritional quality information. These two examples apply the mantra "less is more" informed by behavioural sciences.

What has the European Commission's Joint Research Centre done in the field of behavioural insights for well-being and mental health, and what are your plans for the future?

Last year, the Joint Research Centre published a report on psychotherapy for mental illness in Europe. The document, which was aimed for a policy-makers audience, provided a summary of existing evidence on the effectiveness of psychotherapeutic treatments to tackle mental health illnesses such as depression and anxiety. The author also briefly compared the policies regarding psychotherapy applied in different Member States, showing how diverse they are in terms of access to psychotherapeutic professional titles and reimbursement of treatment by public health systems.

One of our colleagues also published a scientific paper on the association of socio-demographic and environmental factors with mental well-being in preschool children. Correlational data from Germany showed that low household income and non-accessibility to green spaces are strongly associated with children’s mental health problems.

Regarding the behavioural perspective, the Joint Research Centre also published a few reports that tackle the determinants of mental health and well-being. We conducted behavioural experiments in schools to promote physical exercise among kids using collective bonuses and hosted a workshop on novel, ICT-based tools to prevent obesity. Moreover, we published a paper highlighting the importance of descriptive norms (i.e., the perception that one has of what relevant others will do) to predict physical activity intentions. Finally, as part of a project for the Directorate-General Justice and Consumers, we very recently drafted guidelines informed by behavioural sciences on how to design communication campaigns and education activities to prevent psychological and physical violence against women, as well as how to evaluate their effectiveness.

For the future, we plan among others to apply behavioural insights to inform policies contributing to fairness, an important area on the Commission’s political agenda. When citizens feel unfairly treated, this leads to negative impacts on their sense of well-being. Possible areas for future research include the development of tools to assess citizens’ subjective perception of fairness beyond objective economic measures, and the design of...
tools to reduce, in recruitment procedures, negative stereotypes associated with specific groups, such as ethnic minorities, people suffering from mental health disorders, or people undergoing psychotherapy.