

Preface

In 2012 the *New Yorker* magazine reported on the emergence of a peculiar form of soda war in New York City. The ‘Talk of the Town’ article described Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s plans to ban the sale of soft drinks in the city in portions that exceed 16 ounces (Surowiecki, 2012) (Figure P.1). While the soda (or more specifically cola) wars of the past had been waged between competing corporate leviathans, the battle lines in this carbonated conflict have been drawn between government and the private sector. Bloomberg’s initiative has been developed in order to address the ‘supersize’ culture that has seen a rise in the number of people routinely drinking soda in 32-ounce portions, and the various public health issues that are associated with this trend (including rising rates of obesity, heart disease and diabetes). Bloomberg’s desire to ‘downsize supersize’ has been criticized by some as just another example of an overreaching, paternalistic state attempting to intervene within the everyday consumption practices of its citizens. But what is easy to miss is that Bloomberg’s soda initiative actually reflects a fundamental shift in the nature of public policy design. This shift in public policy has been driven by the rising influence of psychology and related behavioural sciences within public policy development. These changes in the nature of public policy have not been confined to New York City, or even the USA; they are now an international phenomenon shaping government policy development in France, the Netherlands, Argentina, Brazil, New Zealand, Germany and the UK *inter alia*. This volume takes a closer look at these policies, what they tell us about the changing nature of government, and their implications for personal choice and freedom.

So what is it that marks New York’s proposed soda policy out as a distinctive form of public policy? The anti-supersize policy targets something called ‘default bias’. Default bias is a phenomenon that a new generation of economists – who operate at the interface of economic analysis of psychology – have been studying for some time. The notion of default bias suggests that people do not make economic choices that are based on perfect knowledge, sustained reflection and rational calculation (a model of economic decision making favoured by classical economists and referred to as the *rationality assumption*). In the frenetic jostle of everyday



Source: Chang W. Lee/*The New York Times*/Redux/eyevine.

Figure P.1 New York mayor Michael Bloomberg and deputy mayor for health Linda Gibbs, 30 May 2012

life, people are much more likely to use handy shortcuts in their decision making. A default bias is a typical example of one such shortcut. A default bias refers to the tendency of humans to be guided in their decision making by preset choices (such as automatic enrolment in a company pension scheme, or being charged on a particular tariff for your domestic energy use). Default options are often followed because they require little effort on the part of the individual and provide the reassuring sense that they reflect a ‘normal’ choice to make. Corporations have, of course, known for some time about the power of default biases and have used them to their advantage by pre-selecting choices that are not in the long-term interests of the consumer, or upping insurance charges on renewal policies on the basis that many people will not want the hassle of changing their provider. What Bloomberg’s supersize ban attempts to do is to establish a new default within soda consumption (16 ounces) that is in the long-term health interest of the consumer. This ban does not prevent consumers buying 32 ounces of soda; it just means that they will have to purchase the soda in two smaller cups (which in itself reflects a psychological prompt to consumers that they are drinking more than a normal amount of soft drink).

New York City’s proposed soda policy is more than simply a rejection of

the assumption of rational human behaviour that has informed previous social and economic policies. Bloomberg's supersize policy acknowledges the important role that emotions (or as some would term it irrationality) play in human decision making. When we use the term *emotions* we are referring to a range of behavioural prompts that guide short- and long-term decision making, but which do not rely on strategic deliberation. Emotional prompts to action can occur at both a conscious and a subconscious level and include the gut feelings of fear, joy and uncertainty that guide automatic forms of decision making, or the routines of habit that may shape behaviours over a longer period of time. At one level, emotionally based behaviours are a necessary and important part of the human decision-making process: not all situations afford us the luxury of the time that is needed to think and deliberate before we act. But in other situations emotionally based decision making can have more pernicious consequences. When emotions govern human behaviour there is a tendency for individuals to misread signals and situations, and to favour short-term gain over long-term costs.

The role of emotions in human behaviour has become an increasingly important focus of research within psychology, neuroscience and cognitive design (see Norman, 1990; Damasio, 1995; du Plessis, 2011). It has also been the foundation for a new discipline: *behavioural economics*. Behavioural economics combines the study of economic decision making with psychological work on the nature of human behaviour (see Kahneman *et al.*, 1982; Thaler and Sunstein, 2008; Heukelom, 2011). At the heart of behavioural economics is a desire to better understand the limits to human rationality and how public policy can be designed in ways that recognize the emotional components of human decision making. Beyond academia, interest in the irrational nature of human decision making has been the subject of a range of popular books, including Malcolm Gladwell's *Blink: The Power of Thinking without Thinking* (2005); Akerlof and Shiller's *Animal Spirits: How Human Psychology Drives the Economy, and Why It Matters for Capitalism* (2009); and Dan Ariely's *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions* (2008). What unites all of this work is not only a recognition of the more-than-rational component of human decision making, but a belief that this irrationality is not random and can be studied, analysed and predicted. It is in this context that what we term a *behaviour change agenda* has gradually been emerging in countries throughout the world. While diverse in its forms, the behaviour change agenda utilizes these new understandings of human conduct as a basis for public policy development.

The purpose of book is twofold: first, to provide an analysis of the historical emergence of the behaviour change agenda, as both an intellectual

project and a basis for governing; and, second, through a series of case studies to develop a critical analysis of this agenda in practice.

In order to understand the full and varied nature of the behaviour change agenda, it is helpful to move beyond New York's soda wars and consider its other manifestations around the world. Let us start in the restaurants and bars of Buenos Aires. According to the World Health Organization, on average Argentines currently consume somewhere in the region of three times the recommended daily maximum intake of salt in their diet (Garlow, 2011). Given the connection between high levels of salt intake and hypertension and heart disease, the Ministry of Health for the Buenos Aires province has recently reached an agreement with the Union of Tourism, Hotel and Food Service Workers to remove salt shakers from the tables of the city's restaurants. The idea behind this initiative is to break the automatic habit that some people have of unthinkingly adding salt to their food. As with many current behaviour-changing policies, Buenos Aires Ministry of Health's initiative does not ban the use of salt shakers: if asked, waiters and waitresses will provide customers with salt dispensers. It is, however, hoped that in the act of having to ask for salt shakers diners will become more aware of their additional intake of salt, and be conscious of the fact that adding salt to a meal is not a normal, or default, practice. Making people more conscious of their automatic behavioural responses to situations and resetting social norms are both key features of the behaviour change agenda.

Let us now move from the bars of Buenos Aires to the autobahns of Germany. If you have had the chance to drive along Germany's autobahns recently, you will have come across a series of posters that have been designed to promote safe driving by the Deutscher Verkehrssicherheitsrat (the German Road Safety Council). The posters, which have been drawn by children, represent the loss of loved family members to road traffic accidents (see Figure P.2). The posters cleverly ask drivers if the disturbing image of the poster has distracted them, and encourages them to stop taking unnecessary risks when they are travelling. Driving is, of course, a practice that is associated with a range of irrational behaviours, including speeding and unnecessary aggression. But what makes this poster campaign emblematic of the behaviour change agenda is its use of social marketing techniques. Social marketing is a branch of the behaviour change agenda that draws on the insights of commercial marketing as a basis for promoting public policy goals. These roadside posters contrast with the more prosaic signs, which inform drivers of the total numbers of accidents or fatalities on a given road, because they deliver messages that are both socially relevant and emotive. As we move through this volume, we will find that the behaviour change agenda is marked by the



Source: Photograph M. Whitehead.

Figure P.2 A road safety sign in Germany

increasing incorporation of corporate techniques into the design of public policies.

The behaviour change agenda also appears to be taking hold in France. The prime minister of France's Centre d'analyse stratégique has recently established a neurological unit to explore the potential utility of behavioural and cognitive sciences in the design of government policy. On the basis of its research on *green nudges*, the Centre d'analyse stratégique has recommended that utility bills in France should enable consumers to compare their levels of energy use with those of other consumers (Olivier and Sauneron, 2011). The thinking behind this policy is that it is often difficult to promote greater efficiency in energy use among households because consumers have very little sense of whether their existing energy use is high or low. Providing comparative energy use information on utility bills acts as a prompt to behaviour change on two levels. First, it provides socially meaningful information on which to base rational action on household energy use. Second, by generating peer-to-peer comparison this information also provides an emotional prompt to energy conservation, as

feelings of comparative frugality or over-consumption of energy stimulate changes in energy practices. The reframing of information in this way is also a distinguishing trait of the behaviour change agenda.

While acknowledging the international scope of the behaviour change agenda, this volume focuses on the development and implementation of behaviour-changing policies in the United Kingdom (hereafter UK). The insights of behavioural economics and psychology have been shaping British public policy since the mid-1990s and throughout much of the New Labour administration's tenure in government. More recently, however, with the election of the Coalition Government, the behaviour change agenda has risen in political prominence. With the establishment of the Behavioural Insights Team in the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, the Coalition Government has been exploring ways of mainstreaming the behaviour change agenda in all public policy sectors. We provide a critical analysis of associated policies that considers their efficacy, ethical implications, and impacts on levels of personal empowerment among citizens.

The research presented in this book was gathered as part of a three-year research project, which ran from November 2008 until October 2011, and was funded by the Leverhulme Trust. This research project explored the historical emergence of the behaviour change agenda and its adoption within the UK. As part of this research we interviewed approximately 40 policy makers who were involved in the development and delivery of behaviour-changing policies. These interviews were conducted with people who worked in the government, charitable and quasi-governmental sectors. In addition to these interviews, we observed specific cases of the implementation of the behaviour change agenda in the planning, environment, food and health sectors. In what follows, we reflect upon the things that we discovered as part of this research. As all of us are geographers by academic training, this volume does draw particular attention to the actual and potential impact of the behaviour change agenda on the design of the everyday spaces in which we live (including our homes, streets and school canteens). Notwithstanding this, we feel that this book, as any study of the behaviour change agenda must be, is interdisciplinary in scope. We thus hope that it will be of interest to urban planners, nutritionists, psychologists, economists, neuroscientists, anthropologists, lawyers and those who study political power in its various manifestations. We also believe that it has some important things to say both to those policy makers who are directly involved in the behaviour change agenda and to the citizens who are becoming increasingly subject to its policy designs.