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Expert Commentary

Going Beyond an Individual-Level Approach with Behavioral Interventions

Sim B. Sitkin

Michael W. Krzyzewski University Professor and Director, Behavioral Science and Policy Center, Duke University, and Cofounder, Behavioral Science and Policy Association

The Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) project was the first major test of behavioral science interventions in human services programs. Led by MDRC and sponsored by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation of the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, BIAS worked with child support, child care, and work support programs across the nation. The team launched 15 tests of behavioral interventions, involving close to 100,000 clients in eight of the participating agencies. Each site saw at least one significant, low-cost impact for its clients. The final report from the project included commentaries by eight experts in the field reflecting on the meaning of the BIAS results and the lessons for the future.

In this Expert Commentary, the sixth in the series, Sim B. Sitkin considers looking beyond individual client behavior when designing interventions (discussed in Chapter 4 of the final report), to target program staff and groups of clients as well as entire organizations.

The BIAS project is an ambitious effort to apply behavioral science principles to improving services related to child care, child support, and work support. As is the case with most behavioral research, the BIAS project focuses on individual client behavior. This approach provides significant benefits by allowing for low-cost, incremental improvements that can accumulate over time.

One extension to this individual-level approach would be to consider the behavior of individual staff members who work with those clients.[1] Another beneficial but larger-scale extension could be to design macro behavioral interventions that target a group (for example, a family or work unit) or an entire organization (the larger context within which individuals behave).

"SIMPLER" WITH A MACRO FOCUS

The SIMPLER framework, discussed in detail in Chapter 4 of the BIAS final report,[2] describes the behavioral principles applied across BIAS: social influence, implementation, making deadlines,

[1] The BIAS study in Oklahoma, which was designed to increase the number of clients who renew their child care subsidy on time, included an intervention aimed at providers, one aimed at clients, and one aimed at both. See Alexander Mayer, Dan Cullinan, Elizabeth Calmeyer, and Kelsey Patterson, *Engaging Providers and Clients: Using Behavioral Economics to Increase On-Time Child Care Subsidy Renewals*, OPRE Report 2015-73 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015).

[2] Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Caitlin Anzelone, and Nadine Dechausay with Patrick Landers, *Nudging Change in Human Services: Final Report of the Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) Project*, OPRE Report No. 2017-23 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017), pp. 13-44; available online at www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/2017_MDRC_BIAS_Final_Report_FR.pdf.

personalization, loss aversion, ease, and reminders. While it focuses on behavior at the individual client level, this framework could readily be extended beyond the individual to the organization. The examples below were developed by drawing on research from other related disciplines, including sociology, organizational behavior, and social psychology.

Social influence. The BIAS project emphasizes individual decision making by assessing clients' responses to concepts like social proof (when people assume the actions of others in an attempt to reflect correct behavior for a given situation) and social persuasion (a deliberate attempt on the part of one party to influence the attitudes or behavior of another). But "thinking fast" — which refers to our automatic, instinctive decisions and actions — is often influenced by formal rules or titles as well as by group norms.[3] For example, Lynne Zucker showed that the tendency to conform to group norms in ambiguous situations can not only be strengthened but also can become permanent simply by giving a formal title to an individual who advocates for the norm.[4] Much research has shown, however, that social influence is not just a matter of one individual's authority — that is, not just one person influencing another person — but relies heavily on the group and the organization in which individuals make their choices.[5] For example, a social worker trying to positively influence the behavior of an individual client might be more effective by working with a family group than with the client in isolation. Similarly, a manager trying to enhance the effectiveness of an individual caseworker might be better able to achieve that result by working with a unit or team and its collective norms, practices, and expectations than by treating that individual worker's performance as an isolated situation.

Implementation. Organizations that implement BIAS project initiatives need to tailor programs to distinct geographical needs as well as ensure that such BIAS initiatives permit flexibility in the approach to providing a service. For example, a behavioral initiative may combine tight rules and procedures with more open-ended and empowering processes, as determined by the situation, which can foster staff and client ownership. In turn, this greater engagement can lead to more effective outcomes than what could occur by imposing uniformly strict or uniformly flexible processes throughout. The delivery of child support services, for instance, could be altered by changing rules in these ways. "Tight" and "loose" rules can coexist in one program, and research has shown that together they can be more effective in shaping outcomes as long as the rules are tight where they need to be (for example, imposing strict requirements for the minimum level of documentation needed to be eligible for a service) and looser in other instances (such as allowing a caseworker to contact clients to secure additional information in various ways).[6]

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[3] Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

[4] Lynne G. Zucker, "The Role of Institutionalization in Cultural Persistence," *American Sociological Review* 42, 5 (1977): 726-743.

[5] Anita Williams Woolley, Christopher F. Chabris, Alex Pentland, Nada Hasmi, and Thomas W. Malone, "Evidence for a Collective Intelligence Factor in the Performance of Human Groups," *Science* 330, 6004 (2010): 686-688; Amy Edmondson, "Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44, 2 (1999): 350-383.

[6] Sim Sitkin, K. Sutcliffe, and R. Schroeder, "Distinguishing Control from Learning in Total Quality Management: A Contingency Perspective," *Academy of Management Review* 18, 3 (1994): 537-564; K. Sutcliffe, Sim Sitkin, and L. Browning, "Tailoring Process Management to Situational Requirements: Beyond the Control and Exploration Dichotomy," pages 315-330 in R. Cole and W. R. Scott (eds.), *The Quality Movement in America: Lessons for Theory and Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000); L. Cardinal, Sim Sitkin, and C. Long, "A Configurational Theory of Control," pages 51-79 in S. B. Sitkin, L. B. Cardinal, and K. M. Bijlsa-Frankema (eds.), *Control in Organizations: New Directions in Theory and Research* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Similarly, allowing individual client service team members to take on a combination of specialist and generalist roles can foster more effective client service teams, by developing a more knowledgeable, a more flexibly deployed, and a more engaged staff. That is, as professionals gain more experience, some may develop a deeper knowledge of a particular area and become area specialists. But some can also develop a strong general knowledge in addition to gaining expertise in one area. Compelling staff members to choose between being either a specialist or a generalist can put everyone at a disadvantage: Some employees might become general managers even though their forté is specializing in one area, whereas others are obliged to work only in their specialty and are not allowed to fully use their general knowledge. Employees can do both general and specialized work either sequentially (on an alternating basis) or at the same time — but allowing for the right mix tends to motivate employees, make the best use of their talents, and result in better outcomes.[7]

Making Deadlines and Personalization. Deadlines that are customized to individual circumstances have been shown to be effective for ensuring that individuals are meeting their goals by decreasing the likelihood that they will procrastinate and increasing the likelihood that they will be more attentive and motivated to meet their objectives. This same process applies to the organizational level, and merits direct testing with a BIAS focus. In general, organizational circumstances vary as much as individual circumstances do, and deadlines can be used with groups or organizations as well as with individuals. Deadlines that are imposed on a work unit or an organization create a drive that can affect individual behavior, primarily through their effect on collective practices. For example, research shows that deadline-driven, organizational-level performance metrics such as quarterly reports or rewards lead to spikes and troughs in performance.[8]

Loss Aversion. A substantial body of research has found that individuals do not like to lose what they already have, and the same finding holds for organizations and groups. Both individuals and organizations generally deal with the threat of extreme failure and its resulting negative feedback — which reflects a loss — in one of two ways: (1) they either dig in their heels and remain committed to their previous behavior, even if it was ineffective (known as "escalating commitment to a course of action"), rather than try something new that might be more effective and might yield a "gain";[9] or (2) they become more passive and pessimistic in response to extreme or numerous failures, which can be so debilitating that threatened loss does not have the predicted motivational effect (known as "learned helplessness") — when, for example, a team neither looks for nor feels empowered to respond to problems, but just awaits instructions.[10] To address these problems, research by Karl Weick suggests that reducing scale (to pursue "small wins") can build positive momentum, and my research suggests how reducing

[7] J. R. Hackman and G. R. Oldham, "Motivation Through the Design of Work: Test of a Theory," *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* 16, 2 (1976): 250-279; T. J. Allen, and R. Katz, "The Dual Ladder: Motivational Solution or Managerial Delusion?" *R&D Management* 16, 2 (April 1986): 185-197; L. Bailyn, "The Hybrid Career: An Exploratory Study of Career Routes in R&D," *Journal of Engineering and Technology Management* 8, 1 (1991): 1-14.

[8] C. Heath, R. P. Larrick, and G. Wu, "Goals as Reference Points," *Cognitive Psychology* 38 (1999): 79-109.

[9] Barry M. Staw, "Knee-Deep in the Big Muddy: A Study of Escalating Commitment to a Course of Action," *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance* 16, 1 (1976): 27-44.

[10] Barry M. Staw, Lance E. Sandelands, and Jane E. Dutton, "Threat-Rigidity Effects in Organizational Behavior: A Multi-Level Analysis," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 26, 4 (1981): 501-524; Jitendra V. Singh, "Performance, Slack, and Risk Taking in Organizational Decision Making," *The Academy of Management Journal* 29, 3 (1986): 562-585.

scale to allow for "small losses" — that is, reducing the scale of negative feedback so it doesn't induce a severe emotional reaction that results in either rigidly adhering to an existing, if ineffective, course of action or doing nothing at all — can leverage the desire to avoid or reverse losses while providing positive motivation to learn from mistakes and take action.[11]

Ease. Structure makes some things easier and other things harder; there are always two sides to the coin when new designs are put in place. The BIAS final report alludes to many interventions that could be grounded in organizational behavior research, such as the impact of "slack," "changing the way agencies work," "inform[ing] the provider" (rather than the client), and enhancing "an awareness of context [to foster] a more coordinated service delivery approach."[12] Similarly, the report's acknowledgment that "innovation can be hindered by tradition" suggests the value of drawing on research into the way an organization's culture affects the capacity for change and innovation.[13] Organizational research suggests, for example, that it is helpful to adopt distinct structures and processes when the goal is to build capacity (learning) versus maintaining or improving performance or reliability.[14] When problems are well understood and their solutions are clear, very specific goals can be articulated, and structures that include milestones and monitoring can focus on those goals. But when goals are very ambitious, problems are ill defined, or proposed solutions are less certain (or even untested), then the needed schedule, resources, incentives, and process structures are quite different.[15] For example, frequent monitoring and micromanaging can be helpful when performance-reliability problems can be anticipated and related problems and solutions are clearly defined and well understood. In contrast, monitoring and micromanaging can be counterproductive if teams are tasked with developing innovative programs and strategies or with solving ambiguous or unfamiliar problems.[16] The general point is that, when developing and implementing behavioral interventions, it is important to recognize that organizational structures that serve to facilitate routine and reliable performance are different from the structures that facilitate radical innovation.

Reminders. Research has shown that reminders can have significant effects, which can be extended by looking first at the broader organizational structure rather than the immediate environment of the individual. An individual focus has the advantage of changing behavior through the use of low-cost reminders, while an organizational focus has the advantage of influencing large groups of people in ways

[11] Karl E. Weick, "Small Wins: Redefining the Scale of Social Problems," *American Psychologist* 39, 1 (1984): 40-49; Sim B. Sitkin, "Learning Through Failure: The Strategy of Small Losses," *Research in Organizational Behavior* 14 (1992): 231-266.

[12] Sim B. Sitkin, Kelly E. See, C. Chet Miller, Michael W. Lawless, and Andrew M. Carton, "The Paradox of Stretch Goals: Organizations in Pursuit of the Seemingly Impossible," *The Academy of Management Review* 36, no. 3 (2010): 544-566; Karl E. Weick, *Making Sense of the Organization* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell, 2000).

[13] The operational lessons for some of these findings are described in Chapter 5 of the final BIAS report. See Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Caitlin Anzelone, and Nadine Dechausay with Patrick Landers, *Nudging Change in Human Services: Final Report of the Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) Project*, OPRE Report 2017-23 (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017).

[14] James G. March, "Exploration and Exploitation in Organizational Learning," *Organization Science* 2, no. 1 (1991): 71-87; Sitkin, Sutcliffe, and Schroeder (1994); Paul S. Adler and Brian Borys, "Two Types of Bureaucracy: Enabling and Coercive," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 41, 1 (1996): 61-89.

[15] Sitkin et al. (2010), Weick (2000).

[16] Ethan S. Bernstein, "The Transparency Paradox: A Role for Privacy in Organizational Learning and Operational Control," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 57, no. 2 (2012): 181-216.

that make the new behaviors seem natural, or even inevitable. Organizational research on routines and institutional procedures shows how embedded reminders (such as posters to wash your hands before returning to work) serve as guides, making some behaviors easier while hindering undesired behaviors. Such institutional reminders thus create the opportunity for long-lasting change by affecting perceptions of what is natural in a particular environment.[17]

IMPLICATIONS

The foundation laid in the BIAS project provides a terrific springboard for future work in bridging the divide between rigorous research studies and behavioral science in practice, and accumulating modest results to accomplish significant long-term progress. To achieve that goal, a broader view that builds on the current platform has several key implications. First, don't ignore the system; contextual effects can facilitate individual outcomes. Second, expand from a focus on clients to include staff and staff groups. Third, recognize the significance of unintended design effects on groups, which can be misconstrued as individual choice, when it is actually a collective choice or structurally determined and erroneously ascribed to choice.[18] Fourth, draw on both best practices *and* best science for insights. Fifth, randomized trials can occur at the group or organizational level. These studies are more expensive and riskier than nonexperimental studies, but also potentially have greater impact over time. Sixth and finally, it would be valuable to more broadly reflect the behavioral and social sciences — not just behavioral economics and psychology, but also sociology, organizational behavior, and so forth.

In summary, while a focus on individual behavior change is a critical step in advancing practice, individual behavior is deeply and unavoidably embedded in organizational structures, processes, and norms. While many principles derived from psychology or behavioral economics can be generalized to the organizational level, new insights are available when we try to understand problems and identify potential solutions through an organizational lens.[19] That is the next challenge to tackle in further advancing this important work.

[17] Martha S. Feldman and Brian T. Feldman, "Reconceptualizing Organizational Routines as a Source of Flexibility and Change," *Administrative Science Quarterly* 48 (2003): 94-118; Martha S. Feldman and Brian T. Pentland, "Organizational Routines as a Unit of Analysis," *Industrial and Corporate Change* 14, 5 (2005): 793-815.

[18] Lawrence Lessig, *Code: And Other Laws of Cyberspace* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

[19] Chip Heath and Sim B. Sitkin, "Big-B versus Big-O: What Is *Organizational* About Organizational Behavior?" *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 22 (2001): 43-58.