# COVID-19 AND CHANGING HABITS

Behavioural economics can help to prevent the spread of coronavirus, but only if its recommendations are based on scientific evidence

by Fadi Makki
🐦 @makkifadi

Covid-19 does not – to date – have a viable preventive vaccine or cure. Until it does, the only solution available to limit its spread is, by and large, behavioural. And, as insights from behavioural science demonstrate, matters of individual behaviour are intriguing and complex, particularly so at a time of great stress and uncertainty. Behavioural economics takes account of people's bounded rationality, as well as other cognitive laminations that affect decision-making. If we are to successfully respond to the pandemic, it is essential that we understand the behavioural roots of compliance, prevention and containment measures. Behavioural economics and related fields have been instrumental in providing a better, more realistic understanding of why people – individuals and groups – behave the way they do. It provides a key departure from the prevailing assumption in economic theories that human beings are rational agents.

## One size fits all?

As has been observed in the US, Brazil and Mexico, among other countries, the response to Covid-19 has been laidback. This has led to an underestimation of the risk of contracting and spreading the disease, not to mention tragic mortality rates. This response was, in part, driven by cognitive biases such as optimism bias and overconfidence. A by-product of overconfidence is the planning fallacy; this means we underestimate our ability to affect future outcomes and the resources required to achieve a task, often neglecting the role of chance and ignoring past experience.

At the other end of the spectrum, the policy adjustments by governments in response to global dynamic social norms were interesting to observe.

Some governments of developing countries, such as India and Egypt, opted to enact the same measures taken by developed and industrialised countries (such as nationwide shutdowns), as an off-the-shelf approach, without assessing the specific impacts on their people and economies. Despite their lockdowns, both these countries failed to contain the spread of the virus. The consequences show that, when applying behavioural insights to public policy, context matters.

## Forming new habits

Behavioural science has taken on particular importance in light of the recent discourse around two concepts that influenced the early stages of the UK's policy response to Covid-19: first, that a slow and calculated herd immunity level was desirable to prevent the disease from spreading further; and second, that public compliance with social distancing measures might diminish over time if started too early. The latter, known as behavioural fatigue, was emphatically promoted by the UK government's behavioural science advisers, but questioned by many others in the field for not being evidence-based. The incident exemplifies the importance of managing expectations and clarifying roles when using behavioural science, particularly in such a high-stakes situation.

Behavioural science should facilitate implementation of expert-driven solutions; its role is not to independently craft a particular health policy solution. It has a plethora of tools and methods that are important for tackling policy challenges through a behavioural lens and adopting and testing solutions. Behavioural mapping is one such tool. It utilises quantitative and qualitative evidence to identify the psychological biases and situational bottlenecks that

could impede a desired outcome. By breaking down the behavioural challenges into stages and identifying who will be affected and how, policymakers can more easily tackle a problem at the root.

Insights from behavioural science can be of paramount importance in helping to make certain behaviours stick. For instance, behavioural science analysis has shown that people comply with prevention strategies when compliance is easy. If hand sanitisers are placed prominently in public places, people are more likely to use them. Utilising social disapproval is also important, as is promoting a public-spirited attitude. Presenting compliance as a strategy that is 'best for everyone', and developing information campaigns that are simple, pragmatic, empathetic and understanding have all been found to increase compliance.

Behavioural approaches should be tested and evaluated to ensure that only those which are found to be successful and sustainable are implemented. The focus should be on bringing experimentation to the forefront of policymaking, ideally through randomised controlled trials (RCTs). While RCTs – the golden standard for behavioural economics and related fields – remain the cornerstone, there are numerous low-cost methods that allow us to test what

works. This is particularly important in times of a pandemic, where we do not have the luxury to conduct extended experimentation, and must instead settle for small pilots, from which we learn and re-adapt to the changing environment. The focus should be on adding experimentation elements to the emergency response and using quasi-experimental evaluation methods (which require minimal informational and personnel requirements) for rapid assessments.

At this time of societal transformation, adoption of behavioural science tools and methods at the governmental and organisational levels are most likely to produce successful results. Introducing 'choice architecture' interventions (nudges that encourage people to make certain decisions but allow them to retain sovereignty) in a timely fashion at key moments can have the greatest impact on increasing the uptake of new behaviours and sustaining them. The increased adoption of behavioural science will encourage the field to evolve further, and we will start to see the integration of its precepts into other areas, including artificial intelligence and other applications that rely on big data. However, this might also increase the risk of potential misuse. It is crucial that adequate ethics codes are enforced as safeguards. ■

Fadi Makki
leads the first nudge unit in the Middle East, B4Development (formerly known as the Qatar Behavioural Insights Unit), and is the founder of Nudge Lebanon



Illustration by Alex Weaver