

Pathways to Policy Innovation: Nudge Experiments vs Collaborative Design

Brian Head

brian.head@uq.edu.au

EXPERTISE CONFERENCE

University of Melbourne

15-16 February 2018



Expertise for policy innovation

- Public policy is fundamentally about managing or resolving collective problems.
 - There is widespread interest in devising better processes and instruments for problem-solving.
- The **policy innovation** agenda covers many fields -- economic productivity, environment, social equity, public safety, and so on.
- **Innovation** has always been subject to changing fashions, intellectual paradigms, and zealous marketing of specific remedies.
- Innovation is also a **commercial** label used to sell products, services, entertainment, and 'reality TV'.

MARRIED AT FIRST SIGHT Season 3

[Watch](#)[Extras](#)

Ad closed by **Google**

[Report this ad](#)[Ads by Google](#)

Latest

[Couples](#)[Experts](#)[Galleries](#)[Sponsors](#)[Apply now](#)

Australia's biggest social experiment is back

[Tweet](#)[Share](#)[Email](#)

Married at First Sight, Australia's most eagerly awaited, groundbreaking social experiment, returns for its third and most explosive series yet, premiering over two big nights, Monday, August 29, and Tuesday, August 30 at 8.40pm on Channel Nine.



100% Online Graduate Diploma of Psychology Advanced

[ENQUIRE NOW >](#)

Most clicked



Nicole's dad not happy with first impressions of Keller

Policy Innovation: Emotion and Expertise

- The policy innovation agenda is partly driven by *political* commitments and slogans – “build the wall”, “stop the boats”, “cut taxes”, declare “war on drugs”
- Here the innovation is the populist message itself – announcing a new policy direction welcomed by supporters – often highlighting **values and emotions**, rather than the **evidence base** for effective delivery of benefits.
- Yet some of these emotion-driven promises can sometimes lead to tangible artefacts (and construction contracts) – the concrete manifestations of populism!

Eight Mexican Wall 30ft prototypes: CBN snews 23 October 2017



Policy Innovation: Democracy and Expertise

- Can we develop approaches to policy innovation that value rigorous evidence, but which also recognise the importance of democratic trust and legitimacy?
- Can evidence-informed approaches be less technocratic and elitist?
- How can we deal with challenging contexts:
 - the tsunami of information
 - low trust in established political and media institutions
 - multiple perspectives about policy ideas.

Four types of expert knowledge for policy learning and innovation

Type of expert knowledge

Research-based **program evaluation** and policy advice

Behavioural research and experimentation

Practitioner & **stakeholder knowledge** and practical experience

Political calculus of party leaders, Ministers and legislators

Example questions

What has worked in the past and how can it be fine-tuned.

Which messages influence positive behavioural choices

What works in managing and delivering services in the field

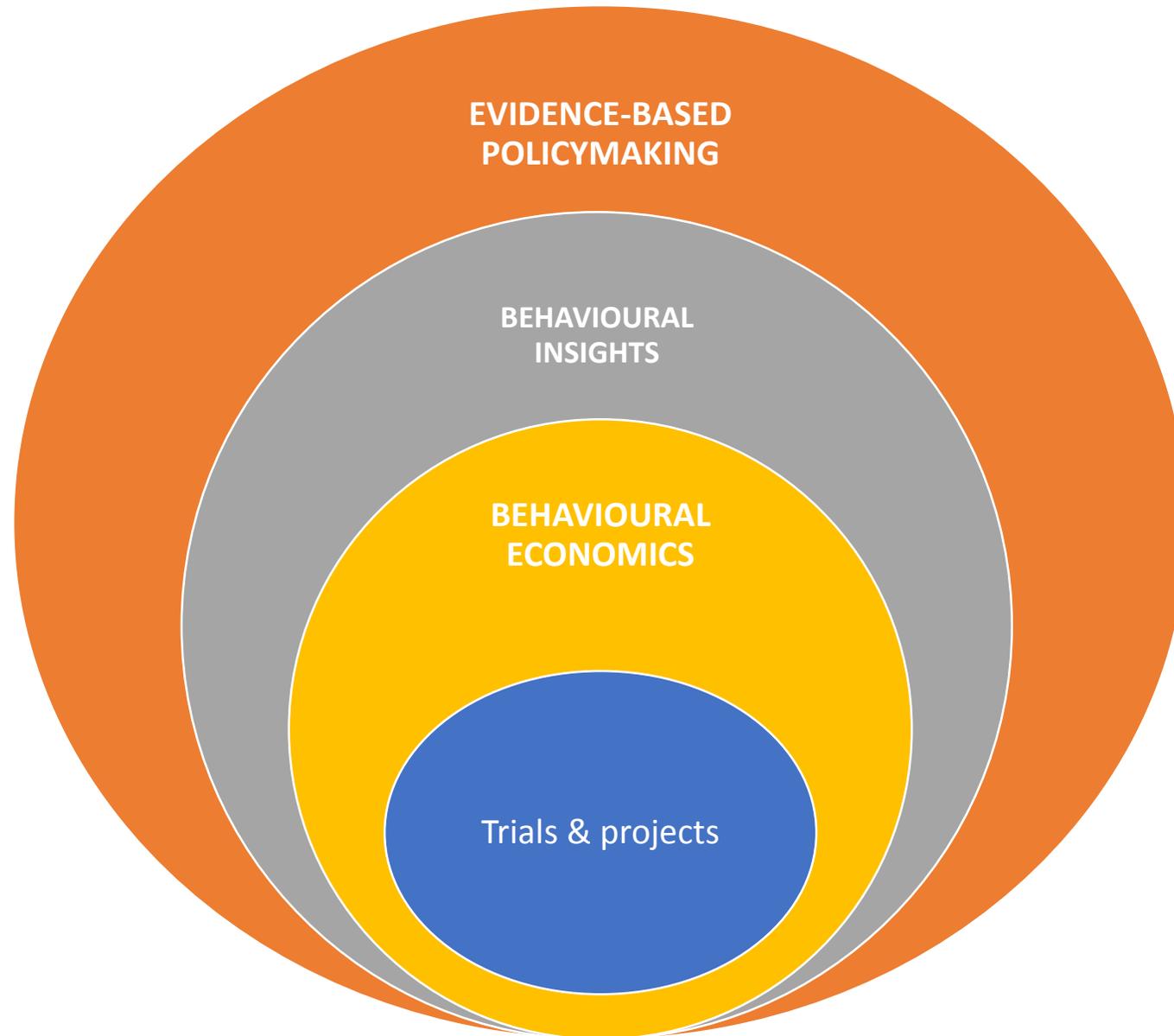
What is feasible and desirable in terms of priorities and support.

Expertise for policy innovation

- Focus of this talk: Two recent approaches to policy innovation which claim to respect evidence and rise above politicised partisanship and ideology.
- They both claim to be anchored in expertise and knowledge, and both claim to advance evidence-based policymaking.
- But they do so in very different ways, illustrating the spectrum of approaches.
 1. **Experimentalism** (especially Nudge and Behavioural Insights);
 2. **Collaboration** across knowledge sectors.

1. Experimentalism for policy innovation

- Micro in orientation, anchored in cognitive psychology and behavioural economics.
- Focus on scientific understanding of individual behaviour through laboratory studies and field experiments (preferably **RCTs**).
- Individual psychology used as basis for designing targeted 'behavioural change' by changing the 'architecture' of citizen choice.
- Aim is to design low-cost innovative instruments, with measurable benefits.
- Preference for voluntary and indirect methods of influence ('nudging'), rather than coercive regulatory methods.



**EVIDENCE-BASED
POLICYMAKING**

**BEHAVIOURAL
INSIGHTS**

**BEHAVIOURAL
ECONOMICS**

Trials & projects

The appeal of behavioural experimentalism

- Early ‘wins’: targeted improvements in operational efficiency (e.g. keeping medical appointments), legal compliance (e.g. tax payments), and public good choices (e.g. organ donation registers).
- Behavioural approaches are increasingly influential in public policy design and evaluation, because they purport to identify the most effective means of leveraging shifts in behaviour.
- This **diffusion** has been encouraged by consultants, government policy units, and university-based Policy Labs in several countries.
- The OECD has sponsored several conferences and surveys of international experience in relation to Behavioural Insights and behavioural economics.
- Several governments have established units to progress these ideas.

2. Collaboration for policy innovation

The second approach is:

- Meso-level or cross-organisational-level.
- Focused on facilitating cooperation and alignment among diverse stakeholder groups on a complex problem.
- Aim is to enhance shared understanding, in relation to:
 - Goals and objectives
 - Strategies and methods for improvement.
- Rejects the medical 'gold standard' notion of reliable science (which recognised only experimental studies or rigorously validated trials).
- Given the rich context of wicked problems, experimental research is not privileged over other forms of knowledge.

Collaboration for policy innovation (2)

Collaborative design typically mixes lay knowledge, professional knowledge and research knowledge.

- A well-known variant is **citizens juries**, where a sample of citizens and stakeholders consider a specific proposal or issue: information inputs, tight facilitation, and rounds of discussion to produce recommendations.
- Another variant is more **exploratory** to rethink an issue. Strong focus on problem-solving through discovery, development and delivery of a new product, service, process or approach. 'Policy Labs' do such work.
- Diverse knowledge groups are usually invited, including experienced practitioners and stakeholders, as well as researchers from various backgrounds.

Comparing three evidence-informed approaches

Conventional evidence-based policymaking	Behavioural experimental innovation	Collaborative design innovation
Program-level designs	Niche contributions	Relational systems are central
Focus on program evaluation research and rigorous performance information	Focus on identifying individual motivations and incentives, to guide construction of nuanced tools for influence	Focus on the diverse knowledge and experience of practitioners and stakeholders
Ambivalence about range of accepted methods and forms of evidence	Little attention to diverse and layered social contexts	Work with the rich relational contexts of complex inter-related issues

Conclusions

- **Evidence-informed policy ideas** and policy framing are more important for policy expertise than ‘evidence’ and ‘data’.
- Relying on technical experts alone to solve problems is bound to fail.
- Many of the claims to novelty, and to achieving major impacts through behavioural experimentalism, have been exaggerated.
- The ‘big’ policy issues still require a full range of regulatory measures, as well as collaborative and conflict-resolution techniques, to complement the specific insights from behavioural nudging and framing.
- The design of good policy innovation needs to join up shared social goals and effective methods for delivering the benefits.

A REPORT ON EXPERTS BY A PANEL OF EXPERTS PREDICTING A LEAN YEAR AHEAD FOR EXPERTS HAS BEEN SLAMMED BY EXPERTS



2 Jan 2017

Finley