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The Netherlands: Government Sponsored Behavioral Control and Social Engineering Experiments

Part I of the Series: Worldwide, social engineering has become standard operating procedure for governments

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A government-wide network of behavioral experts – the Behavioral Insights Network Netherlands (BIN NL) – has been supporting all departments in conducting behavioral experiments since 2014. The experiments aim to use behavioral knowledge from the social sciences to steer citizens toward "right" solutions and choices. At their core, they involve large-scale application of manipulation techniques, in policy development, implementation, monitoring and communication. Although much information about this can be found on government websites, most citizens are probably unaware of these social engineering experiments. Nor has there been a public discussion about the desirability of applying this knowledge.

According to BIN NL, "almost all government policy focuses on behavior change." The network was established in 2014 because the cabinet "would like all ministries to experiment with applying behavioral insights to different policy themes, and a government-wide network to drive this."

These behavioral insights are based on knowledge from psychology, social science, behavioral science and behavioral economics, and focus on steering people toward desired behavior so that they automatically and unconsciously make the "right" choices. This can be done, for example, through 'nudge' in the right direction, without the imposition of coercion or economic incentives. For example, you can encourage healthy eating by presenting the healthy food in the cafeteria first, and the croquettes last. In policy terms, this is called "adjusting the architecture of choice." There are many methods for directing people's behavior in this way: by rearranging the environment, by presenting information in a certain way, by playing into feelings of belonging to a group or fear of exclusion, or otherwise by evoking emotions such as fear, shame, pride, guilt, etc. The behavioral sciences specialize in applying these insights.

The interest in applying this knowledge arose in 2004 as a result of experiences of the Dutch army in conducting psychological operations in Afghanistan. The Scientific Council for Government Policy (WRR), whose task is to advise the government and parliament on social issues, investigates the possibilities for the government to apply behavioral knowledge and issues an opinion in several reports, such as "The human decision maker" (2009), "Making policy with knowledge of behavior" (2014), and "Knowing is not doing" (2017). To this end, she works with government officials, policy makers, politicians, scientists, and the "social field."

The core idea that emerges in these reports is that citizens have limited rationality and can no longer cope with all the choices and complexity in society. In "Knowing is not yet doing," the WRR writes: "Today's society makes high demands on the resilience of citizens, there is quite a difference between what is expected of citizens and what they can actually cope with. The WRR continues: "From the behavioral sciences, it has been shown that people's ability to weigh information and make rational choices is limited," namely because of so-called limited "non-cognitive abilities, such as setting a goal and making a plan, taking action, persevering, and being able to deal with temptations and setbacks ... these [non-cognitive abilities] are often referred to in everyday life as 'personality' or 'character'." The non-cognitive abilities or character traits are also referred to as 'doing abilities' in policy documents. The government can "help" overcome these "limitations" by guiding behavior. The WRR, in its report "Making policy with knowledge of behavior," states, "more and more policymakers are exploring how to use choice architecture to compensate for cognitive limitations of citizens."

The British Behavioral Insights Team (BIT) is cited as an example that is attracting international attention with successes. Author Laura Dodsworth, who wrote the book "State of Fear" about the application of behavioral insights in the UK during the corona crisis, writes of the BIT, "The BIT was established in 2010 by the government of David Cameron. Britain is so good at applying behavioral insights that it has become an export product. The BIT is now a profitable company with a 'social purpose,' with offices in London, Manchester, Paris, New York, Singapore, Syndney, Wellington and Toronto. In 2019 alone, they carried out 750 projects in 31 countries worldwide. In total, they trained more than 20,000 public servants in applying behavioral knowledge." She continues: "Behavioral science and nudges focus on distracting or making certain choices difficult. It is used to avoid discussion and instead manipulate people without them realizing it. It is an attack on people's ability to decide for themselves what is good for them."

"Should the Netherlands also have such a team?" the WRR writes, advising the government to respond as a government "to the limited doing abilities of citizens by adapting the choice architecture." The government followed up on the WRR's advice, in 2014 by setting up BIN-NL so it can support ministries in conducting behavioral experiments, and in 2018 with integrating behavioral considerations into policy development. In January 2018, then-Minister of Law Sander Dekker and Minister of the Interior Kasja Ollongren wrote in a letter to the House of Representatives that "in principle, the Cabinet sees added value in freedom of choice and that the degree of freedom of choice should be considered on a case-by-case basis."

The core team of BIN-NL meets monthly and organizes various activities, such as lectures, a training module for government trainees, and the congress Day of Behavior. Every two years, BIN NL issues a report to the Senate and House of Representatives, which reports on

the experiments in the areas of health, work, education, finance and more. The idea that behavioral control is necessary to achieve policy goals comes up repeatedly in it, for example for achieving climate goals, the digital transition and the inclusive society.

When developing policy, officials apply the Integral Assessment Framework (IAK), which is a set of questions that must be answered before policy or regulations are submitted to parliament. It provides structure for developing good policy. On June 29, 2018, Minister Dekker wrote to the Senate that in order to "make broader use of behavioral insights," "the criterion of doability will be included in a number of existing policy instruments," including the IAK.

How will this work in practice? If there is "reason to correct behavior," the IAK provides a convenient step-by-step framework for applying behavioral insights. Step one maps out "what current behaviors are perpetuating, exacerbating or improving the undesirable situation. In doing so, also look at what facts and figures are known about the behavior."

In the next step, the official determines the target group so he knows "which target group you want to change the current behavior." Step three formulates "the behavior you want to see in your target group": "Instead of the current behavior, who will exhibit what behavior in the future, where and when?" Step four maps not only the target group, but also the "context, motives and drivers. The next step is to map what process/steps the target group goes through in exhibiting the desired behavior and which parties that person will have to deal with. In what context does the target group find itself? What does someone have to do to exhibit the desired behavior? With which parties does this person come into contact?". Based on these steps, an intervention plan (step 5) is developed, with which "people are as it were automatically guided towards a sensible choice", which is tested in a "pilot or living lab" (step 6). In the last step, effects are evaluated, and there is also a possibility of monitoring for long-term effects. The implication of all these interventions is that a lot of behavior needs to be monitored. Although not referenced, the step-by-step scheme is very similar to the Behavioural Dynamics Methodology (BDM) developed by British SCL group, which is used by defense. The BIN-NL supports civil servants in applying behavioral insights.

Applying behavioral insights

- Step 1. Map current behavior
- Step 2. Determine the target group
- Step 3. Formulate the Desired Behavior
- Step 4. Context, motives and drivers
- Step 5. Develop an intervention plan
- Step 6. Implement the intervention
- Step 7. Evaluation

In a free society, should governments apply social engineering?

Most examples of pilots and experiments that BIN-NL reports on every two years seem harmless at first glance: paying off your student debt faster, eating healthier, or setting off fireworks safely. But the underlying assumption is that citizens cannot think for themselves, that the government must then do that for them, and that the government is therefore right in its problem analysis and chosen solution. It ignores the fact that there can be disagreement – discussions for which there is less and less room.

However, other topics are less innocent. BIN-NL writes: “The Netherlands faces many different transitions. Think of the climate transition and the digitalization transition. They have at least one thing in common: behavioral change is needed to achieve policy goals. This also applies to major policy themes such as health, housing, mobility and an enabling and inclusive society.” Digitalization is strongly related to the prison of air that is being built around us with current technology. Should we allow ourselves to be manipulated in it, or is deliberately choosing analog solutions where possible a way to maintain autonomy and privacy? The government’s ideal image for living seems to be life in a “smart city,” regulated by cameras and sensors, with no room for farmers. The desirability of this is anything but fixed. The “inclusive society” mostly represents a radical “woke” agenda. Should behavioral scientists already be working to get us, through “choice architecture,” to “choose” that dystopia ourselves?

Nor does there seem to be any doubt – is it the government’s job at all to direct the behavior of citizens? In a free society, citizens are allowed to choose how they behave, provided they do not harm others. Is the problem that citizens are “cognitively limited,” or is the problem that we have an out-of-control, opaque, impenetrable byzantine bureaucracy as a government, that tries to micromanage the lives of individuals? What are the ethical frameworks for large-scale behavioral experiments by government that citizens have not chosen nor been informed about? The BIN-NL website has no information on this. The behavioral experts seem to see mostly the opportunities and benefits.

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