

Nudging public policy: The role of knowledge in behavioural insights

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Declaration

This thesis is my own original work. It contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at any university.

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Abstract

Behavioural insights is increasingly used by governments around the world in designing public policy. It is an important addition to our knowledge about how policy works. However, little is known about policy actors' interpretation and use of different types of knowledge in the development and applications of behavioural insights. This omission matters because policy actors' privileging or excluding of different types of knowledge in policy making influences whose voices are heard, how problems are seen and framed, and what solutions are made possible (and preferable). Policy actors bring different forms of knowledge to policy making and, in making sense of policy problems and designing policy, shape policy processes. My research explores the question; how do policy actors interpret knowledge in behavioural insights? It has two lines of enquiry: which knowledges are used in behavioural insights, and do policy actors use knowledge instrumentally, politically or conceptually? I adopted an interpretive approach in my research in order to uncover the interpretations that shape policy actors' actions. The interpretations emerged from the analysis of thirty interviews with policy actors in Australia familiar with behavioural insights in their policy work.

My findings demonstrate that it is important to pay attention to both what knowledge(s) are used and how they are used. I find policy actors interpret behavioural insights as an instrumental application of policy making that draws on and produces knowledge, with local knowledge struggling to fit into processes that privilege technical knowledge. Local and technical knowledges are interwoven with craft and normative knowledge as policy actors use knowledge politically to privilege their approach to behavioural insights, granting them resources and authority. The use of these types of knowledge

in behavioural insights influences how policy problems are interpreted, understood and addressed. My research contributes to understanding of behavioural insights as a policy approach, but also provides methodological insights into interpretive policy analysis by challenging the intentionality between interpretation and action. It contributes to the knowledge utilisation literature in describing the interdependent uses of instrumental, political and conceptual knowledge. Finally, my research suggests that the uses of knowledge shape and are shaped by each other and it is this 'system' that should be included in the study of knowledge in public policy.

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1 CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Behavioural insights is an approach to policy making that is increasingly applied in government administrations around the world. However, little is known about the role of knowledge in behavioural insights. This omission matters because the way policy actors use knowledge, and the types of knowledge they use, influences whose voices are heard in policy how policy problems are seen and framed, and what solutions are made possible (and preferable). Therefore, the interpretations and use of knowledge in behavioural insights has implications for how policy problems and solutions are understood, shaped and addressed in policy making.

In this research, I aim to understand the role of knowledge in behavioural insights. I ask, how do policy actors interpret and use knowledge in this approach? I focus on policy actors, as it is how policy actors make sense of the different types of knowledge that influence policy processes. In this research I use an interpretive approach, as it focusses on sense-making and is helpful in understanding how policy actors make sense of knowledges, which are seen as legitimate and persuasive, and how this influences their use in policy making.

In this chapter I describe the key concepts in behavioural insights and define how I use these terms in the thesis. I discuss the increasing popularity of behavioural insights, particularly in Australia which is the focus of this research. I consider the importance of the study of knowledge, before turning to the rationale for the research. I argue for a focus on policy actors and use the term to describe the bureaucrats and consultants who make sense of, design, and implement behavioural insights. I

describe my research questions and briefly introduce my interpretive approach to this study. In the final section of this introductory chapter I describe the thesis structure, and outline how this thesis will proceed.

1.2 BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS IN PUBLIC POLICY

Government administrations around the world have enthusiastically embraced an approach to policy making known as behavioural insights (Feitsma 2020). The OECD (2021) has recorded more than 200 institutions applying behavioural insights to public policy. This includes institutions in Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Columbia, Germany, Greece, Japan Kuwait, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey, UK and USA, (OECD 2021). A recent review of over 500 policy papers found 81 countries were using behavioural insights from 2010-2019 (Strassheim 2021). Support for behavioural insights is found across the political spectrum in both conservative and liberal government administrations (Quigley and Farrell 2019). The use of behavioural insights in public policy has been reported in the areas of finance, employment, health, environment, energy, education, consumer protection and tax compliance (OECD 2017).

The importance of behavioural insights to some government administrations was revealed in the coronavirus pandemic. In India, nudges were critical in government reactions to coronavirus, used to encourage social distancing, mask wearing and adhering to lockdown rules (Debnath and Bardhan 2020). Governments in both the UK and the Netherlands have been criticised for an overreliance on nudging the public in their response to the pandemic. In the UK, the use of behavioural insight's measures, to encourage hand washing for example, were criticised for being used at

the expense of more rigorous approaches such as lockdowns (Sibony 2020). Thus while some academics have argued behavioural insights operates at the periphery of policy making (Hansen 2018) and have compared behavioural insights to other ‘fads’ in policy making (Strassheim and Beck 2019), the use of behavioural insights across different countries, political spectrums and policy areas, and its use in the pandemic demonstrates the increasing influence of behavioural insights as an approach to policy making.

While there is no agreed definition or interpretation of behavioural insights (Ball 2021), the OECD define behavioural insights as,

An inductive approach to policy making that combines insights from psychology, cognitive science, and social science with empirically-tested results to discover how humans actually make choices. (OECD 2021)

As an approach to policy making, behavioural insights is distinguished by an emphasis on the role of behaviour in designing policies, and the biases and heuristics that influence behaviour, and on empirical testing.

The development of behavioural insights has been heavily influenced by the concept of nudge (Baggio et al. 2021) which argues that people are subject to a number of different biases and heuristics in decision making (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). For example, when making a decision about whether or not to have a surgery, people will respond differently if the information is presented as “90% of people are alive five years after surgery” than “10% of people are dead five years after surgery”

(Kuehnhanss 2018). Advocates for behavioural insights argue that incorporating these biases and assumptions of irrationality into policy making can lead to better policy outcomes (Baggio et al. 2021).

The definition of behavioural insights highlighted above also refers to how insights on decision making are combined with “empirically-tested results” (OECD 2021). This reference to empirical testing reflects the association between behavioural insights and testing of policy interventions, particularly through randomised control trials. Behavioural insights teams have advocated for randomised control trials as the best way to find ‘what works’ in policy (Haynes et al. 2012). This commitment for finding ‘what works’ in policy making has led behavioural insights to be linked with evidence-based policy making (Strassheim and Kettunen 2014; Kuehnhanss 2018).

Different terms and concepts are used in this area. The terms behavioural insights and nudge are often used interchangeably in academic literature, along with terms such as behavioural economics, behavioural science and behavioural public policy. In this thesis I draw on academic literature, government discourse and my data in selecting which terms to use. I use the term behavioural insights to encompass the approach to policy making. I use the term nudge to describe specific interventions or projects that have been developed using principles of behavioural economics and psychology. The book *Nudge* popularised the concept of nudging and was released in 2008 by two academics Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). Nudging encourages policy actors to become “choice architects”, changing the decision making environment to encourage people to make a particular choice (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). I provide more detail on these concepts and how they are similar or differ in the following context chapter.

The increasing use of behavioural insights in public policy has been accompanied by a growing academic focus on the topic (Leong and Howlett 2020). A bibliometric analysis of top public policy journals found nearly ten percent of publications related to behavioural insights (Rawat, Strassheim, and Beck 2019). The paper found articles in top public policy journals written about behavioural insights and experimental trials on biases and behaviours has increased sharply since 2006, although publications in this area were identified from the 1950s which was the earliest date in the analysis. The studies were mainly located in the USA and Europe, however studies were also published in Asia, South America and Australia (Rawat, Strassheim, and Beck 2019). This pattern is found in another bibliometric review which investigated the increasing number of articles that were written about behavioural research in public policy (Leong and Howlett 2020). Although both papers investigated slightly different constructions of behavioural insights, their findings suggest a growing body of literature and increasing academic interest in the area.

To date, the literature exploring behavioural insights has focussed on issues about the ethics of nudge (Bovens 2009; Barrett 2011; Goodwin 2012; Hansen and Jespersen 2013; White 2013; Wilkinson 2013; Sunstein 2015; 2016; John 2018b; Lepenies and Małecka 2020), perhaps because of the controversy surrounding the approach which I discuss further below. The literature has also focussed on the effectiveness of the approach, reflected in the bibliometric analysis above which found a growing number of publications reporting experimental studies testing behaviour and biases (see also Cheung and Ardolino 2011; Kusters and Van der Heijden 2015; Quigley and Farrell 2019). Other research has begun to trace the development and practice of behavioural insights as a policy approach (Hansen 2018; John 2018a; Sanders, Snijders, and

Hallsworth 2018; Khadzhyradieva, Hrechko, and Smalskys 2019; Ball and Head 2021; Detenber 2021; Strassheim 2021).

However, the role of knowledge in behavioural insights has not been a focus in academic literature. This matters, because as the practice of behavioural insights grows, the impact of knowledge used in behavioural insights also grows. Yet little is known about how knowledge is used in behavioural insights, for example, how it may be shaping policy problems processes and outputs, or how it may be amplifying or silencing voices. This lack of consideration of the role of knowledge in behavioural insights defines an important area for research. I now turn to the role of knowledge in public policy and define key terms I use in my thesis.

1.2.1 The role of knowledge in public policy

Knowledge in behavioural insights has been neglected as a focus of study, despite the central role of knowledge in the practice of policy making. As Daviter (2015, 491–92) notes,

The role of knowledge in the policy process remains a central theoretical puzzle in policy analysis and political science...Understanding different types of knowledge use and how they affect the policy process therefore remains a key concern of current research.

This excerpt neatly encapsulates the importance of the role of knowledge and studying the types of knowledge in policy processes. Knowledge can improve the design and impact of policy making, leading to more effective policies and better outcomes for

society. In public policy, knowledge has a role not only in shaping policy solutions, but in shaping understandings of policy problems and which policy problems should receive attention (Janowitz 1969; Weiss 1979; Cairney 2019). Knowledge can influence how policy problems are framed (Bacchi 2009) and how they should be solved (Weiss 1979). In public policy, knowledge can be used to claim truths (Marston and Watts 2003) and silence voices (Maddison 2012).

Knowledge has been described as a “well-probed belief, whether empirical or evaluative” (Lindblom 1990, 123). Carol Weiss (1986) discusses social science knowledge as research, analysis, evaluation, and data. In this thesis, I use the term ‘knowledge’ to refer to a wide range of knowledges, including data, information, a well-probed belief, and knowledge that comes from lived experience. I use the term ‘evidence’ to refer to a label that is given to knowledge. This labelling may occur by organisations, through the use of evidence hierarchies (Nutley, Powell, and Davies 2013) or by influential actors (Fraser and Davis 2019). The label of evidence gives that knowledge “visibility and standing” (Weiss et al. 2008, 43) and legitimacy in policy processes. In my thesis I differentiate between knowledge, referring to a wide range of knowledges, and evidence as a label. I make this critical distinction to draw attention to the political contestations that surround the labelling of evidence which I identify in this thesis.

When examining the role of knowledge in public policy I draw on two key areas of literature, knowledge utilisation and evidence-based policy. The ‘knowledge utilisation’ literature emerged from the research and study of evaluation (Radaelli 1995) and the evidence-based policy movement comes from the area of medicine (Boaz and Nutley 2019). However, evidence-based policy, as a theoretical and scholarly area of

literature, is also the latest version of debates in the knowledge utilisation literature (Newman 2017). I focus on evidence-based policy scholarship as my starting point in the knowledge utilisation literature as it covers many of the recent debates and theories of knowledge in policy. Moreover, evidence-based policy making has become a pervasive paradigm in many administrations around the world (Head 2010b) and part of the discourse of administrative policy workers (Marston and Watts 2003). Thus, this literature is also helpful in understanding the context in which policy actors apply behavioural insights. The evidence-based policy literature is also useful in drawing attention to the impact of the absence of knowledge in policy making and debates about policy based on values and ideology. I examine this further Chapter 3, but I turn first to the frameworks I used to explore the role of knowledge in behavioural insights.

1.2.2 The *uses* of knowledge in public policy

Evidence is seen as vital to both the design and assessment of policy making (Boaz and Davies 2019). It can improve the development and impact of policy making, leading to more effective policies and better outcomes for society. This description reflects an instrumental application of knowledge in policy making. The instrumental use of knowledge represents a linear application of knowledge used to solve policy problems (Weiss 1979). Knowledge can also be used politically or conceptually. The political use of knowledge is where knowledge is used to support a policy position (Cairney 2019) or to legitimise a decision (Radaelli 1995). The conceptual use or influence of knowledge is where knowledge slowly changes understandings of policy issues (Weiss 1986). These three uses of knowledge are “fundamental to understanding the relationships between evidence and policy” (Head 2013, 397). Despite the importance of the use of knowledge in policy, there is limited research

exploring whether these instrumental, political and conceptual uses of knowledge are separated or complementary (Amara, Ouimet, and Landry 2004). My thesis also responds to calls for more empirically driven studies of how knowledge is used in policy making (Cairney 2019, 35). My thesis considers how knowledge is used instrumentally, politically or conceptually in behavioural insights, but also how different types of knowledge are used in public policy.

1.2.3 *Types of knowledge in public policy*

The *type* of knowledge that is used in behavioural insights has implications for both public policy processes and outcomes. The use or absence of different types of knowledge are a way of framing or constraining debates about who or what counts in public policy (Parsons 2002; Maddison 2012). For example, the privileging of scientific, technical knowledge and the absence of local experiential knowledge in policy making excludes those in the community from having a voice in policy and in the decisions that affect them (Yanow 2003a).

In this thesis I identify four types of knowledge from the literature, technical, local, craft and normative, which may be used in public policy. Technical knowledge is scientific (Yanow 2004) and concrete (Daviter 2015) and linked to verifiable knowledge (Emmert 1985). In the context of public policy, technical knowledge is often derived from randomised control trials and cost-benefit analysis. Technical knowledge is sometimes juxtaposed to local knowledge. Local knowledge is the knowledge of a local context that comes from experience (Yanow 2000). This might include users' knowledge of a government service or local community members' knowledge about the impacts of a policy. In the context of public policy, craft knowledge is the local knowledge of public servants derived from the experience of policy making (Rhodes 2016). This might

include the ‘small p’ political negotiation required of public servants or the knowledge of frontline workers. Normative knowledge is consideration of the values of policy making, drawing on knowledge of the context. In policy making, normative knowledge is reflected in how policy actors negotiate the values and impact of a policy.

1.3 THE ROLE OF KNOWLEDGE IN BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS

In my thesis I argue that how knowledge is used and the types of knowledge that are used have implications for policy processes and outcomes. In this section I consider the few empirical studies that have examined policy actors’ use of knowledge in behavioural insights.

1.3.1 The limited focus on knowledge in behavioural insights

A small but growing body of research has started to explore the role of knowledge in the practice of behavioural insights from the perspective of policy actors. For example, Strassheim and Korinek (2016) have explored behavioural insights in Germany and the UK. While most of this work is theoretical, it also includes some empirical research with practitioners. Strassheim’s work provides a rich foundation of literature exploring the scientific presentation of knowledge in behavioural insights in the context of evidence, expertise and authority on which I draw on throughout my thesis. Feitsma (2018; 2019; 2020) has looked at the role of behavioural insights actors as knowledge brokers in the Netherlands. As I explore in Chapter 3, he considers how behavioural insights presents as an instrumental approach, but can sometimes draw on other knowledges. However, he does not consider how these different types of knowledge are used. Further, his research occurs in Netherlands, and there is a need to understand behavioural insights in the Australian context. This is because the application and varieties of behavioural insights differs by country and administrative

context. For example, in the Netherlands, behavioural insights is decentralised and applied at the departmental level, whereas in Australia behavioural insights has been centralised and institutionalised. The two countries are associated with different clusters or forms of behavioural insights (Strassheim and Korinek 2018).

The Australian context provides a useful case study for understanding behavioural insights. The centralising and institutionalising of behavioural insights suggests a government enthusiastic about behavioural insights. Further, as I examine in my context chapter, behavioural insights in Australia has close ties to the UK Behavioural Insights Team who have been instrumental in the development of the approach. Ball (2021) has explored the practice of behavioural insights in the Australian context, and considers how behavioural insights is interpreted. She also usefully questions the presentation of behavioural insights as an instrumental application of knowledge, however, how different types of knowledge are used is not a central focus.

Although limited, research on knowledge in behavioural insights suggests that a focus on technical knowledge in behavioural insights may devalue other types of knowledge (Feitsma 2018; Ball and Head 2021) and, as I examine in Chapter 3, limited research also suggests that local or craft knowledge may sometimes be incorporated into behavioural insights practices (Feitsma 2018; Ball and Feitsma 2020). To date, however, how policy actors make sense of different knowledges, such as local, craft and normative knowledge, and how these may be used instrumentally, politically or conceptually in behavioural insights has not been the focus of study.

1.3.2 A focus on policy actors

Here I consider the reasons I focus on the role of policy actors in interpreting and using knowledge. Policy actors play a pivotal role in behavioural insights and nudges. In nudges, policy actors design the decision making environment, with Thaler and Sunstein (2008) labelling them the choice architects. It is the policy actor's responsibility to design the environment in such a way that it helps people make the right decisions for themselves (Hansen and Jespersen 2013). Thus it is the policy actors who are steering the public towards certain decisions. Policy actors may hinder the use of nudge (Stoker 2012) or promote its use (Feitsma 2020).

In this thesis I also focus on policy actors to draw attention to the importance of agency in the interpretation and use of knowledge. The body of knowledge on which I draw in my thesis is sometimes referred to as the knowledge utilisation literature, with the evidence-based policy literature a recent addition to this scholarship. Such language of 'knowledge use' can obscure the agency of the actors interpreting and using the knowledge. In my thesis I deliberately focus on policy actors to draw in the agency of the actors in research and analysis on behavioural insights.

Colebatch et al. (2010) have argued that a focus on 'policy workers' (those who work for and in policy) is essential in policy analysis. This is because it is the sense-making of policy workers, that is how they interpret and respond to the policy environment, that influences and affects the way policy is framed and made. It is the policy workers who are "agents' that enact policy realities that structure and potentially innovate and change subsequent policy acts" (Colebatch, Hoppe, and Noordegraaf 2010, 7). Policy analysis can also focus on institutions, networks, implementations and outcome. However, in this thesis I instead focus on the "acts and experiences" that build to

understandings of policy processes and outcomes (Noordegraaf 2010). This focus on “acts and experiences” is distinctive and important because it is the individual acts that make up policy dynamics and policy processes, such as those around behavioural insights.

The thesis’ focus on policy actors is further distinguished by a concentration on ‘mid-level’ actors. Mid-level actors within and external to government are not often the focus of such analysis, and thus this thesis contributes to a growing body of research analysing their work (Colebatch, Hoppe, and Noordegraaf 2010). The perspective of policy actors in behavioural insights has also been largely neglected (Feitsma 2019). I focus on these actors, rather than politicians, because it is at this level that behavioural insights is enacted.

In the context of knowledge and behavioural insights, it is policy actors that are making sense of and interpreting knowledge in behavioural insights and using this knowledge in the design and implementation of these projects. Policy actors bring their knowledge to policy work, and the ways in which policy actors make sense of and use these knowledges (whether scientific and codified or learn on the job) is an important area of focus in policy making (Colebatch, Hoppe, and Noordegraaf 2010) to which this research contributes. Thus in this research I focus on how policy actors make sense of and use knowledge, and different types of knowledge, in behavioural insights because of the impact and influence they have on policy making.

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTION AND APPROACH

As I have argued, despite the increasing interest of behavioural insights in practice and in academic literature, the role of knowledge in the approach has been a neglected area of study. The research question for this thesis is - how do policy actors interpret and use knowledge in behavioural insights? This has two complementary lines of inquiry

Which types of knowledge play a role in behavioural insights?

Do policy actors use knowledge instrumentally, politically, or conceptually?

To examine these questions, I use an interpretive approach. Interpretive approaches focus on meaning (Yanow 2007) as these meanings and beliefs shape actions and practices (Hay 2011). Interpretive policy analysis is helpful in understanding how policy actors make sense of knowledges and which knowledges are seen as legitimate and persuasive. These interpretations then shape how knowledge and evidence is used in behavioural insights, whether this is instrumental, political, or conceptual.

1.5 THESIS STRUCTURE

In the following chapter, Chapter 2, I set out the context or background of behavioural insights. I discuss the principles of behavioural insights and the academic foundations of the approach, including its association with randomised control trials. I then describe the increasing use of behavioural insights in government administrations, highlighting the importance of the study of behavioural insights and its impact on public policy. I reflect on its use in the Australian policy context, the focus of this research. I then consider some of the reasons for its popularity, before turning to questions about both the ethics and effectiveness of behavioural insights, demonstrating the importance of the study of behavioural insights.

In Chapter 3 I critically examine the knowledge utilisation and evidence-based policy literature. I first analyse the literature on the different types of knowledge and develop a typology of knowledge in public policy. I argue that knowledge can be framed in four ways. Firstly, it may be seen as technical, such as scientific and academic knowledge. Secondly, knowledge may refer to local knowledge of the community and the public derived from their experiences. Thirdly, craft knowledge of policy actors represents knowledge that is learnt on the job in the public service. Finally, normative knowledge provides guidance about what should be done in public policy. I then argue that knowledge can be differentiated from evidence, and that evidence is more usefully described as a label that is applied to knowledge and contested by policy actors in the policy process. Next, I consider how knowledge is used, drawing on the influential knowledge use framework of instrumental, political and conceptual. I examine the limited research on what behavioural insights says on each knowledge use. I conclude this is a useful framework for my analytical chapters.

I describe my methodology and methods in Chapter 4. In this thesis I differentiate between methodology, how the knowledge is acquired, and methods, the process to generate that knowledge. I describe my interpretive methodology and qualitative methods, including my abductive approach to theorising, and why these are appropriate for my research question. However, I also note how behavioural insights challenges assumptions of interpretive policy analysis, which I build on in my empirical chapters. I outline the data generation process, including my purposive sampling method and the research interviews. I then describe my approach to data analysis, including how I made sense of the data.

In Chapter 5, my first empirical chapter I examine the instrumental use of knowledge in behavioural insights. The instrumental use of knowledge is a linear application of technical knowledge to solve policy problems (Weiss 1979). I explore how policy actors interpret behavioural insights as an evidence-based approach to policy making, and use knowledge in two phases. In the first 'understand phase' policy actors draw on academic knowledge from behavioural insights theory and produce local knowledge. In the 'test phase' policy actors produce technical knowledge in experiments and randomised control trials. I identify a tension as policy actors struggle to fit local knowledge into technical processes, leading to a 'technifying' of local data.

In my second empirical chapter, Chapter 6, I explore how behavioural insights also embodies a political use of knowledge. This chapter builds on the instrumental chapter by arguing that the interpretation of behavioural insights as an instrumental evidence-based approach leads to policy actors advocating for its use. Policy actors use their craft and normative knowledge to grow the behavioural insights approach. This includes the 'making' of behavioural insights knowledge as evidence, and the contesting of evidence to advocate for their particular model of behavioural insights which emphasises either local or technical knowledge. This chapter also argues that interpretive policy analysis should place more emphasis on the importance of the administrative context in shaping actions, and to consider competing beliefs in the approach as actors negotiate this context and take action.

In Chapter 7, my third empirical chapter, I examine the conceptual influence of knowledge. I explore how the instrumental and political uses of knowledge influence policy actors' understanding of the policy terrain. I argue the instrumental application of behavioural insights and the political knowledge used in the advocacy of its

approach may be reorienting policy actors' interpretations of policy problems as behavioural and measurable. This chapter again reveals the tension in the use of evidence and knowledge, and proposes reasons drawn from the literature on why behavioural insights knowledge may be reframing policy problems. This chapter concludes with an analysis of the interdependence of the knowledge and types of knowledge in behavioural insights.

In my conclusion, Chapter 8, I provide a summary of the research context and my research and analytical approach. I highlight my key findings and the methodological, empirical and theoretical contributions of this thesis. I discuss my implications for practice and provide suggestions for future research.

First, however, I turn in the next chapter to the context or background to behavioural insights. In providing the context for my thesis and analysis, I am not only familiarising the reader with the key concepts and background, I am also reinforcing the important role of context in my analysis.

2 CHAPTER 2: CONTEXT FOR THE RESEARCH

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Policy actors are increasingly applying behavioural insights to policy making however, the concept of behavioural insights is contested. Different terms and concepts are used, sometimes without distinction, in practice and the academic literature. In this chapter I critically evaluate some of the descriptions or constructs of behavioural insights and associated terms to set the background context for my research. I consider the principles of behavioural insights and nudging and their theoretical basis. These principles are important not only to understand the concept of behavioural insights, but also because they influence the practice of behavioural insights which I examine in my empirical chapters. I draw attention to the importance of the contexts in which nudge and behavioural insights have emerged and provide detail on the growth and popularity of the approach in Australia. I examine some of the key debates on the ethics and effectiveness of nudge and behavioural insights, to highlight the importance of the study of this area for public policy.

2.2 BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS AND NUDGING

In Chapter 1 I described behavioural insights as an approach that is empirically tested and uses insights from academic disciplines to understand behaviour and decision making (OECD 2021). However, there are multiple interpretations of behavioural insights (Troussard and van Bavel 2018; Strassheim and Beck 2019; Ball 2021) and these concepts are not well-defined (Khadzhyradieva, Hrechko, and Smalskys 2019). I begin with an examination of the definition of nudge, as it is the theory of nudges

which first generated government interest in behavioural insights (Smith and Toprakkiran 2019).

Thaler and Sunstein (2008, 6) define a nudge as

any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people's behaviour in a predictable way, without forbidding any options...the intervention must be easy and cheap to avoid.

The book *Nudge* (Thaler and Sunstein 2008), mainly uses examples to define the concept of nudge (Hausman and Welch 2010) however, these examples can contradict stipulations from Thaler and Sunstein (2008) themselves. For example, the book describes nudges that include economic incentives even though Thaler and Sunstein exclude fiscal measures as a form of nudging (Baldwin 2014). One nudge described in the book is designed to encourage firms to release their pollution record to enable a 'environmental blacklist' however, this would entail significant financial sanctions (Hausman and Welch 2010). Thus the definition of nudge provided by Thaler and Sunstein has been described as unclear. The confusion over what is or is not a nudge is reflected in the number of alternate models or definitions of nudge offered by academics (for example, see Hansen and Jespersen 2013; Baldwin 2014; Rebonato 2014). Further, since the release of the book *Nudge*, and perhaps in a response to the popularity of the concept, any policy intervention that changes behaviour has been labelled as a nudge (Gigerenzer 2015).

The theory of nudge is further obscured as it is sometimes seen as synonymous with Libertarian Paternalism (Hansen 2016). Libertarian Paternalism was positioned by Thaler and Sunstein as the philosophy of nudge and suggests that while people are nudged towards a choice, they are still free to make another decision (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). Libertarian paternalism is typically seen as the philosophy, and nudges as the interventions (Angner 2015) but the two terms are often used interchangeably in the literature (Gigerenzer 2015). Nudge is also sometimes conflated with behavioural economics. Perhaps in response to the challenges in locating nudges and behavioural economics, the OECD drew the distinction of behavioural economics as a scientific sub-discipline, and nudging as the possible use of behavioural economics to the application of policy making (in Hansen 2016).

This confusion over the contested definition of nudge has led to use of the more all-encompassing term behavioural insights (Detenber 2021). The term behavioural insights has also grown in popularity due to the influence of the UK Behavioural Insights Team (Ball and Head 2021).

Although there is no agreed definition of behavioural insights, here I identify a number of common concepts that emerge in descriptions of the approach as context for my empirical research. These descriptions of the approach provide important background for my research in understanding policy actors' interpretations of knowledge in behavioural insights.

Firstly, central to concepts of behavioural insights in academic literature is people's behaviour and how they make choices. For example, behavioural insights has been described as "applying a more nuanced and evidence-based understanding of human behaviour to inform the policy-making process" (Troussard and van Bavel 2018, 8),

and “integrating findings from other (social) sciences...to the analysis of human behaviour and policy-relevant phenomena” (Kuehnhanss 2018, 6). Here behavioural insights is interpreted as a way of including the role of human behaviour in policy making.

Secondly, there is a focus on empirical testing. The definitions above note the importance of “analysis” (Troussard and van Bavel 2018, 8) and an “evidence-based understanding” (Kuehnhanss 2018, 6) in behavioural insights. The OECD definition included in the introduction argued behavioural insights uses “empirically-tested results to discover how humans actually make choices” (OECD 2021). This is demonstrated in behavioural insight’s preference for randomised control trials (Ball and Head 2021). Therefore, also central to behavioural insights is an emphasis on the importance of analysis and evidence.

Thirdly, and related to the above emphasis on empiricism, behavioural insights draws on academic research from “neuroscience, sociology, biology” (Kuehnhanss 2018, 6). Other definitions note that behavioural insights takes contributions from “cognitive psychology, anthropology, social psychology, behavioural economics, sociology and other behavioural sciences” (Baggio et al. 2021, 1). These either implicitly or explicitly refers to the biases and heuristics theory of thinking.

These central concepts of behaviour, testing, and academic research are also found in ‘competing’ concepts or theories. In academic research, behavioural public policy and behavioural public administration have also become popular terms used to describe policy making directed by and focussed on behaviour, although these terms are not used often by practitioners (Ewert 2020). Behavioural public policy is a broader term that encompasses a ‘behavioural lens’ to the whole of the policy process. It

includes not just applying behavioural insights to the public, but also to policy makers and to institutions (Ewert 2020). One recent handbook focussed on behavioural public policy defined the term as,

all means and modes of public policy aiming at influencing individual or collective behaviour by using insights from behavioural economics, behavioural sciences, psychology or neurosciences. (Strassheim and Beck 2019, 2).

The book notes that the field is an emerging and contested space and uses the terms behavioural public policy and behavioural insights interchangeably. This description of behavioural public policy is strikingly similar to that of behavioural insights. I suggest that the term behavioural public policy does not differ substantively from calls for behavioural insights to be applied to government administrators and organisations and to all parts of the policy process (OECD 2017; Hansen 2018; Sanders, Snijders, and Hallsworth 2018).

This synonymising and interchangeability of terms illustrated in scholarship is also found in practice. Ball (2021) argues that practitioners have three interpretations of behavioural insights; behavioural insights as nudges, behavioural insights as citizen-focussed policy, and behavioural insights as trials and testing, or ‘what works’. In government departments, behavioural insights teams may be called “nudge units, behavioural insights and behavioural science or economics teams” (Ball, Hiscox, and Oliver 2017, 21). Government in the UK and in Australia often use the term behavioural insights, however, the term ‘nudge’ is used by government outside of formal publications. For example, the New South Wales (NSW) Behavioural Insights Unit and

the Institute for Public Administration Australia (IPAA) presented the 'Behavioural Insights in Action Forum' where examples were given of behavioural insight policies alongside discussions on the politics and limitations to nudge (Institute for Public Administration Australia and Department of Premier and Cabinet 2013). Similarly, 'behavioural insights' and 'behavioural economics' are used interchangeably by government in Australia. The federal government's BETA (Behavioural Economics Team Australia) website refers to the NSW's Behavioural Insight Unit's work as behavioural economics, and their own work as behavioural insights, stating,

We are the Behavioural Economics Team of the Australian Government, or BETA. We are the Australian Government's central unit for applying behavioural insights (BI) to public policy (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Australian Government 2021).

The lack of agreed definition of these terms is a common occurrence in emerging policy areas (Troussard and van Bavel 2018). My intention in describing these definitions is not to argue for the conclusive use of one over the other. Rather I provide this information to set the context for my research and to introduce concepts that may have influenced policy actors in how they use knowledge in behavioural insights. These descriptions also provide justifications for the use of terms in my thesis. I use the terms behavioural insights and nudging, as these are the dominant terms used in government and my research focuses on interpretations of the approach in public policy. I use nudge to refer to interventions that use principles from behavioural economics and psychology to change people's behaviour, and behavioural insights to refer to the broader discipline or approach. This also reflects academic scholarship

where behavioural insights is generally seen as broader than individual behaviour change or nudges (Ewert 2020).

In the next section I describe the principles underpinning nudging and behavioural insights. I again begin with the theory of nudges, as this has been influential in the practice of behavioural insights (Delaney 2018) and as the principles of behavioural insights build on many the principles of nudge.

2.3 PRINCIPLES OF BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS AND NUDGES

Nudging draws on principles from psychology and behavioural economics. Richard Thaler, one of the authors of Nudge has been referred to as the father of behavioural economics (Amir and Lobel 2008) and in 2017 won the Nobel Prize in economics illustrating his influence in academic work and policy (Strassheim and Beck 2019). Behavioural economics itself has developed from neo-classical economics, with recognition that humans do not always act rationally as economic theory predicts. Rather people have 'bounded rationality' and are constrained by limited cognitive capacity and time when making decisions (Hansen 2016). The theory of bounded rationality was developed by Herbert Simon, who argued for a focus in public administration on decision making and understanding behaviour (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2017).

Thaler and Sunstein (2008) propose that traditional policy tools, like regulation or education campaigns, are designed for 'super humans' who always think rationally. Nudge proposes that government should consider bounded rationality in designing policies and recognise the cognitive errors in decision making. That is, people are irrational, and may not make choices that are in their best interest because of biases and heuristics. The concept of cognitive biases and heuristics was developed

by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, and their psychological theories of two system thinking (Tversky and Kahneman 1974). Two system thinking, popularised in the book *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Kahneman 2011), argues people have an automatic System 1 thinking process, and a reflexive System 2 thinking process. Most easily illustrated with examples, System 1 thinking might include how an experienced driver slows down to turn a corner, and with little reflection changes gear, puts on the blinker, and turns the wheel. Even basic mathematical sums ($2+2=?$) may be calculated quickly without conscious thought by System 1. Yet 1674 divided into 8 requires more reflexive thought, and learning to drive uses the more slow, effortful, System 2 thinking process. System 1 and System 2 do not operate in isolation, but interact to work well most of the time, because System 1 is generally efficient and accurate (Kahneman 2011, 25).

Thaler and Sunstein (2008) however, argue that these processes can sometimes operate in error and lead us to make 'incorrect' decisions that we would not make if we were using the reflexive slower, System 2 thinking. The System 1 and System 2 thinking processes means that 'rules of thumb' or mental shortcuts are sometimes used when making decisions. These cognitive biases and heuristics result in people sometimes making poor choices (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). In Table 2-1 below I describe a number of these biases and heuristics (adapted from Thaler and Sunstein 2008). These include loss aversion, which posits that people value something more once it is in their possession, and status quo bias, where people tend to prefer the current situation than an alternative one.

Table 2-1

Principle	Definition
Anchoring	People frame or anchor their thinking based on one piece of information and adjust their estimations or thinking based on this anchor
Framing	The way in which a statement is presented makes a difference to the choices made
Loss Aversion	The same item or amount is worth more once someone has it. There is a preference to avoid loss over receiving the same thing or amount (gain)
Status Quo Bias	The tendency, or preference to stick with the current situation

I note here the body of literature which questions the two system theory of thinking and its assumptions, including if the two systems do or do not work well together (for example, see Grüne-Yanoff and Hertwig 2016). However, discussions on the validity of nudge's foundations and the broader behavioural economics literature in general are outside the scope of this thesis. My research focusses on the interpretation of knowledge in behavioural insights, rather than its academic validity, although as I discuss further below the effectiveness of nudge has implications for the impacts of behavioural insights on policy making.

The theory of nudges both recognises the concepts of biases and heuristics in decision making and makes use of these in trying to influence decisions. For example, in a list of choices, policy actors can make the decision they want people to choose the default option. Default options have been found to have a strong impact on choice, as people tend not to change the selection (Craig Smith 2013). They are thought to work in three ways – implied endorsement, cognitive biases, such as status quo bias and loss aversion, and effort. The classic, oft used, example of defaults is organ donation. When donating organs is the default option, that is people need to actively make the

choice not to be an organ donor, donation rates in countries are around 90%. When the default is people need to opt in to be an organ donor, rates are in the ten percent range (Johnson and Goldstein 2003). Such results have influenced a number of countries to change their default organ donation status (Jachimowicz et al. 2019). This example illustrates how information about biases and heuristics can be used to nudge people towards a particular decision.

The biases and heuristics models introduces a fundamental concept of Thaler and Sunstein's nudge, which is "choice architecture". Thaler and Sunstein (2008) use the phrase choice architecture to explain the role of context or environment in choice, asserting that the way a choice is presented will influence the decision people make. Choice architects make use of heuristics and biases when designing the environment a choice is made in, such as making the desired decision the default in a list of choices. Advocates of nudging argue that policy actors are choice architects, who should design policy to help people make the 'right' choice. Here the 'right' choice, as defined by Thaler and Sunstein (2008), is the decision that people would make if they were not limited by cognitive capacity, time or subject to cognitive biases and heuristics. In this way, policy actors are able to guide people to make better choices for themselves and society.

One further related concept, Libertarian Paternalism, needs to be explicated in providing the background to the principles of behavioural insights and nudging. Thaler and Sunstein (2008) first proposed that the concept of nudge sits in the philosophy of Libertarian Paternalism. Nudge is libertarian, as people are still free to make their own decisions *and* paternalistic as it attempts to influence choices to improve their lives (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). Libertarian Paternalism is sometimes

described as a form of soft (Jones, Pykett, and Whitehead 2011) or asymmetric (Grüne-Yanoff and Hertwig 2016) paternalism. The approach is positioned as the third way, designed to bridge the gap between the statist approach and those supporting libertarian markets, satisfying both the left and the right wings of politics (Amir and Lobel 2008).

Despite its construction as a neutral political approach, Libertarian Paternalism is inherently normative as it supports a particular construction of state/citizen relations. Libertarian Paternalism proposes government's role is to steer citizens' choices (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). Libertarian Paternalism is sometimes seen as less relevant in behavioural insights as units are now set up to endorse evidence-based principles rather than those of Libertarian Paternalism (Lepenies and Małecka 2020). However, I include this context given the importance of nudge in the behavioural insights approach. Further, in practice, Libertarian Paternalism seems to implicitly drive behavioural insights approaches. For example, the NSW Behavioural Insights Unit suggests that

By recognising the nuance of human decision making, the field puts the onus on policy makers to design environments that support good decisions.
(Behavioural Insights Unit (NSW) 2020, 7)

These principles of nudge have become the building blocks of the behavioural insights approach in government policy making. Biases and heuristics feature prominently in behavioural insights (Ball and Feitsma 2020) and behavioural insights and nudges are sometimes seen as synonymous (Ball and Feitsma 2020; Strassheim 2021). However,

as examined, behavioural insights is often described as broader than nudges and biases and heuristics (Kuehnhanss 2018; Strassheim 2021) behavioural insights is also associated with an emphasis on experimentation and testing.

The use of trialling and randomised control trials has become almost a defining component of behavioural insights. Randomised control trials are an experimental method where the sample population is randomly assigned to different groups. One assigned group is the control which receives no intervention, and the other randomly assigned group is given an intervention. This then enables the two groups to be compared to determine the effectiveness of the intervention (Haynes et al. 2012).

Behavioural insights equivalency or association with trialling has been shaped by the work of the UK Behavioural Insights Team, which was established in 2010. The UK Behavioural Insights Team advocacy of randomised control trials has been called a core feature of their work (John 2014) and the team has become 'synonymous' with randomised control trials (Delaney 2018). In 2012, the Behavioural Insights Team in the UK published a report advocating for the use of randomised control trials. The report focusses on randomised control trials (RCTs) as the best way to determine the effectiveness of a policy (Haynes et al. 2012). Essentially a 'how-to' guide, sections in the report include "What is an RCT and why are they important" and "The case for RCTs-debunking some myths" (Haynes et al. 2012). Randomised control trials form part of the "Test, Learn, Adapt" framework that has been promoted by the UK Behavioural Insights Team. 'Test' refers to the carrying out of a randomised control trial, 'Learn', to analysing the results of the randomised control trials and 'Adapt' is adjusting the intervention to take into account these findings.

The focus on randomised control trials is also seen in the Australian context. In one strategic communication, the NSW Behavioural Insights Unit argued,

Trials help develop better policies and services. The application of Behavioural Insights goes hand in hand with an experimental approach to designing policies and services. Randomised controlled trials are a valuable tool to generate the evidence needed to learn what works and what doesn't. This evidence-based approach enables us to adapt our policies so that they steadily improve both in terms of quality and effectiveness. (Behavioural Insights Community of Practice 2013)

This excerpt from the first behavioural insights unit in Australia reflects the commitment of the team to undertaking randomised control trials. The trials are associated with evidence-based policy and 'what works'. A more recent report from the same team reinforces this commitment to randomised control trials, noting,

We take an empirical approach, gathering insights from data and developing an evidence base. Much of our time is spent designing and running trials to determine what works before supporting a wider rollout of successful interventions. (Behavioural Insights Unit (NSW) 2020, 9)

These above examples illustrate how empirical testing has become a core principle of the behavioural insights approach in Australia. The role of evidence in behavioural insights is examined in the following chapter as it pertains to the literature on

knowledge utilisation in public policy. Next, I provide three examples of behavioural insights projects to illustrate how these principles have been applied in government administrations, before turning to examine the growing interest in the use of behavioural insights in policy making.

2.3.1 Project examples

In the UK, a nudge was developed to encourage households to recycle food waste using the principles of social norming. Social norming is the subtle influence or pressure to behave the same way as peers or a social group. A randomised control trial was designed where households in the trial group were provided with feedback on their street's recycling levels compared to others in their area. They were also provided with details on how to participate in the food recycling scheme. Recycling levels were measured by monitoring the food waste bins put out for collection. This nudge was found to have raised recycling rates by 3%. The authors acknowledge that whilst statistically significant, the effect was quite small (John, Smith, and Stoker 2009).

One of the early projects undertaken by the NSW Behavioural Insights Unit was with the Office of State Revenue and tested the difference in letters encouraging people to pay their fines. Using a randomised control trial design, one group was sent the version of the letter usually sent to the public, the other group was sent a version which incorporated behavioural insight principles. The behavioural insight principles included examples of social norming (for example, 8 out of 10 people pay their tax on time), salience (introducing directions on what is required) and priming (from using blue to red colours as fines became overdue). The trial was deemed a success, with a 12%

increase in payments received on time (Behavioural Insights Community of Practice 2014).

The OECD described a behavioural insights project located in South Africa between 2012 and 2015. The project aimed to both assess and encourage attendance at an after school program which was designed to increase student engagement and outcomes. One aspect of the project targeted parents of students and used messaging informed by behavioural insights principles such as social norming and salience. The messages were tested in a randomised control trial where the control group received no message and the intervention group were sent SMS messages which included either their children's attendance at the program or their attendance plus information emphasising the benefits of attending. The researchers concluded that the messages increased the rates of attendance compared to the control (6%) and the intervention was a cost-effective approach to encouraging attendance (OECD 2017).

These examples both demonstrate how behavioural insights is applied in practice and highlight the principles significant in behavioural insights. These significant principles include firstly the emphasis placed on influencing behaviours, secondly on empiricism and testing, and how behavioural insights attaches importance to randomised control testing, and thirdly on recognising and using biases and heuristics in projects.

2.4 THE RISE OF BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS

Government interest in behavioural insights is often attributed to the release of the book *Nudge* (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). For example, academics have noted that nudging gained prominence following the release of the book in 2008 (Hansen and Jespersen 2013). Thereafter Cass Sunstein was appointed to Obama's administration (Kosters and Van der Heijden 2015), and Richard Thaler became an

advisor to the Cameron Government in the UK (Kuehnhanss 2018). In this section I first consider the increasing use of behavioural insights in the UK, as this was one of the first established teams and because of its influence on the approach internationally. I then briefly consider the use of behavioural insights in the USA and then Singapore, to illustrate that behavioural insights is not a phenomenon restricted to western countries (although they dominate its use (John 2019)). I then examine the rise of behavioural insights in Australia, where this research is based.

In 2010, the Cameron Government in the UK established the Behavioural Insights Team as part of the Prime Ministers and Cabinet's office. The unit was commonly known as the 'nudge unit' (Quigley 2013), and indeed still refers to itself as such (Behavioural Insights Team 2021). It was initially set three objectives;

Transform at least two major areas of policy; spread an understanding of behavioural approaches across Whitehall; and achieve at least a tenfold return on cost (Sanders, Snijders, and Hallsworth 2018, 2).

The UK Behavioural Insights Team have been enthusiastic promoters of behavioural insights and its impact in the UK government has been profound. In 2011, one government committee concluded that the government was so focussed on nudging it was putting other policy approaches at risk (Science and Technology Select Committee, 2011). Despite these concerns, behavioural insights continued to thrive. In 2012, behavioural insights became required training for civil servants (Strassheim, Jung, and Korinek 2015) and it has been adopted so enthusiastically by government

it was described as the default option for public servants (Jones, Pykett, and Whitehead 2014).

In 2014, the UK Behavioural Insights Team became a joint venture, part owned by the UK government, NESTA the innovation charity, and its employees, yet still most of its work remained with government (Rutter 2015). In 2021, the team became wholly owned by NESTA (Behavioural Insights Team 2021). The Behavioural Insights Team has worked with almost every government department, as well as local government, not-for profits, and overseas administrations. The now international organisation has completed over 750 projects worldwide (Baggio et al. 2021), and has offices in UK, USA, Singapore, and Australia.

Although the team was established by the UK's Cameron Government, interest in behavioural insights can be traced back to previous government administrations. In 2004, New Labour's Cabinet Office Strategy Unit released a report titled 'Personal Responsibility and Changing Behaviour'. While the report provided a broad review of different theories of human behaviour, it emphasised the theory of biases and heuristics (Jones, Pykett, and Whitehead 2013) and championed the use of behavioural theories and knowledge to develop better policies (John 2013). The report argued that the use of the behavioural sciences in public policy would be more cost-effective and empower citizens to make the 'right' choice (Strassheim, Jung, and Korinek 2015). The report was politically controversial, with politicians and the media expressing concerns about taxes on unhealthy food however, public servants within government were attracted by its potential application to public policy (Jones, Pykett, and Whitehead 2013). Behavioural insights continued to be applied arbitrarily to policy development, although significant government advisors advocated for the approach.

This culminated in the publication of the 'MINDSPACE: Influencing behaviour through public policy' report in 2010. The framework described how to apply the principles of behavioural insights to policy. This background suggests that the 'Nudge Unit' was established in an administration that was familiar with the behavioural sciences.

Strassheim, Jung and Korinek have argued that the New Labour administration's emphasis on evidence-based policy also supported the rise of behavioural insights as a legitimate policy approach. Evidence-based policy making played a pivotal role in New Labour's political strategy in the UK (Wells 2007). However, the movement was criticised as undemocratic and prioritising experts in government. Behavioural insights became "a renewed form of evidence-based policy making" (Strassheim, Jung, and Korinek 2015) that still embraced expertise and scientific evidence, but was framed as empowering people to have more control over their lives. Moreover, behavioural insights promised to reconfigure the relationship between academics and government administrations, the former having become dissatisfied with a lack of impact from the evidence-based policy movement (Strassheim, Jung, and Korinek 2015). The emergence of behavioural insights in the UK, foregrounded with evidence-based policy and an increasing interest in behavioural theories, suggests that the context or background in which the approach emerges and is applied is important.

In the USA, following the release of the book *Nudge*, Cass Sunstein was appointed as head of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs. Then, in 2015 Barack Obama's administration established the Social and Behavioural Sciences Team. The team was required to carry out an Executive Order from Obama to consider how behavioural insights could be used in policies and services. The team worked in the areas of health insurance, workplace saving, and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The team also promoted an evidence-based testing approach to policy and projects (National Science and Technology Council 2016). The team was suspended by the Trump administration (Kuehnhanss 2018). Since then, the International Behavioural Insights Team organisation has opened an office in the USA, working with government on behavioural insights projects.

Singapore has also embraced behavioural insights. The first team dedicated to the use of behavioural insights, the Home Team Behavioural Sciences Center, was established in Singapore in 2006 (Strassheim and Korinek 2018). Many agencies now apply behavioural insights to their area of work, and public servants in Singapore attend behavioural insights training programs (Detenber 2021). Behavioural insights has been used in the areas of finance, environment and health, and many of these projects also uses a trial and testing approach. To illustrate with one example, a randomised control trial was conducted to test the efficacy of different messages designed to reduce the water usage of residents in HDBs, or public housing blocks. These messages included financial incentives, and information, as well as messages using social norming, comparing their own water consumption to others (Goette, Leong, and Qian 2019). While this is an example of perhaps a fairly standard behavioural insights project, Detenber (2021) usefully draws attention to the importance of context in which behavioural insights is used. He argues that concerns about paternalism are less relevant in Singapore than other countries because of the political environment which accepts government authority (Detenber 2021).

The use of behavioural insights in the different countries as described here demonstrates the popularity of behavioural insights, and that administrations have a particular context that supports its growth. In the UK, behavioural insights emerged in

an administration familiar with behavioural theories and evidence-based policies. In the USA, behavioural insights had the support of Obama's administrations, and in Singapore's, the administration has a strong history of paternalism. I now turn to the context in which behavioural insights has emerged in Australia.

2.5 AUSTRALIAN POLICY AND BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS

Government administrations in Australia have also enthusiastically embraced behavioural insights. In 2007 the Productivity Commission held a roundtable on Behavioural Economics and Public Policy, wherein they cited the work of Thaler and Sunstein. The roundtable discussed the notion of Libertarian Paternalism, and how the decision making environment can be designed to help people make the right choice (Productivity Commission 2008). The Australian Public Service Commission also released two papers on the principles of behavioural insights (Australian Public Service Commission 2009; 2007). Then, in 2010, nudging was raised in a research paper released by the Australian Parliament titled 'Paternalism in social policy - when is it justifiable?' which discussed how nudge may be a form of hidden paternalism (Thomas and Buckmaster 2010). While a number of projects that could be described as applying behavioural insights have been identified as early as the 1990s (Ball, Hiscox, and Oliver 2017), the first centralised unit to support the use of nudges was established by the NSW government in 2012. The unit was located in the Department of Premier and Cabinet, the centralised department which coordinates and directs much of the state's policy. The NSW unit had close ties to the UK Behavioural Insights Team, with the head of the NSW unit seconded from the UK team. This reflects the close connection between behavioural insights in Australia and the UK Behavioural Insights Team (Ball and Head 2021).

Since its inception, the NSW unit has worked in a range of areas, including cancer screening behaviours, private health insurance uptake and return-to-work programs. The unit now sits in the Department of Community Services in NSW. They use a three stage approach to developing behavioural insights projects. They begin by understanding the relevant issues and behaviours and the context of the policy problem. This stage may involve fieldwork and data analysis. They then apply behavioural insights principles in a 'Build' stage, where they draw on academic research and information from frontline staff to design interventions. In the next 'Test' stage these interventions are tested, typically in a randomised control trial. This is the stage that is the focus of much of their work (Behavioural Insights Unit (NSW) 2020).

In the Australian state of Victoria David Halpern, a leading figure in the establishment of the UK's Behavioural Insights Team, collaborated with VicHealth, a statutory authority in Victoria, on seven behavioural insights trials in 2014. He also delivered seminars and workshops on the approach (Jones, Head, and Ferguson 2021). This may well have led to an increased awareness and enthusiasm for the approach, and in 2016 the government created the Victorian Behavioural Insights Unit. The unit consolidated the work of a Behavioural Insights Network which had been operating for two years. The unit is located in the centralised Department of Premier and Cabinet's Public Sector Innovation Branch. Its work has three domains. Firstly, delivering behavioural insights projects, secondly working in an advisory capacity, and thirdly building behavioural insights capability through training, seminars and workshops. Their website states that randomised control trials are used wherever possible, noting,

Central to Behavioural Insights is the principle of testing. Where possible, public policy should be supported by robust evidence. (Department of Premier and Cabinet (Victoria) 2017)

A report released in 2019 described projects they had worked on which included increasing organ donor registrations, supporting students to complete their studies using SMS messages and reducing the incidence of missed appointments in the health care system (Department of Premier and Cabinet (Victoria) 2019).

The federal government established the Behavioural Economics Team Australia (BETA) in 2016, which is located in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. BETA applies behavioural insights to public policy with a commitment to undertaking randomised control trials. The aim of the unit was to design and test policy that reflects ‘real human behaviour’. The website states they “pride ourselves on our commitment to rigorous, evidence-based policy and testing what works.” (Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet 2020). In Australia, the interest in behavioural insights spreads beyond teams located in centralised offices that I have highlighted. There are behavioural insights teams in Australian federal departments and agencies, including the Department of Health, Environment and Energy, Human and Social Services and the Tax office. Behavioural insights teams have also been established in departments and agencies at the state level, for example, the Department of Family and Community Services in New South Wales. In 2018, Australia hosted the Behavioural Exchange Conference, which included presentations from international researchers and practitioners, including Cass Sunstein. The report from the conference was introduced by then-Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull, reflecting the senior government support for,

and legitimacy of, the approach in the Australian context (Behavioural Exchange 2018).

There have, however, also been criticisms of the application of behavioural insights that have emanated from the media and from government. In the UK for example, as mentioned above, the House of Lords' Science and Technology Select Committee undertook an enquiry into nudging and behaviour change. The report was released in 2011 and argued that more evidence was needed on the effectiveness of nudging. They also claimed that the government was focussing on nudges to the exclusion of other potentially more effective tools such as regulation (Science and Technology Select Committee. 2011). Stoker (2012) also found departmental hesitancy in the UK in applying nudges. Nudges were not supported by The Department for Environmental Farming and Rural Affairs who were reluctant to have nudge advocates interfere with their own behaviour change programs (Stoker 2012). Bureaucratic tensions and internal politics between departments and teams may hinder how nudge is interpreted and its subsequent adoption.

In Australia, criticism of nudging has been more muted to date, although at the announcement of the establishment of BETA, Senator Scott Ryan acknowledged its sometimes controversial use,

Behavioural sciences, particularly as they are applied to economics, can provide fascinating insights into how current policy settings drive or deliver particular responses or results. However, while these tools help us to understand the world as it is, they do not on their own automatically provide the political or public justification for using these tools to change policy, or seek to alter human behaviour. Senator Scott Ryan (in Easton 2015).

Here he draws in some of the criticism of the ethics of nudging and the role of government in manipulating the behaviour of the public. Indeed, there have been prolific debates on both the ethics of nudging and its effectiveness in the academic literature. I now turn to a discussion of these debates on ethics and effectiveness to demonstrate the potential consequences and implications of governments applying behavioural insights in policy making.

2.6 CHALLENGES TO BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS

2.6.1 The ethics of behavioural insights and nudging

The ethics of whether government should nudge, and the impact nudges have on freedom of choice and decision-making, have been a focus of intense debate. While these academic debates focus on nudging many of the concerns also apply to the use of behavioural insights given the blurred boundaries of these approaches. The use of nudges within behavioural insights teams also means these ethical debates are relevant to behavioural insights in government (Lades and Delaney 2020).

One significant critique of nudging is its covert nature. As nudges make use of biases and heuristics, and these types of nudges use non-reflexive, automatic thinking, people may not know when they are nudged. Therefore, people may not be aware they are being steered in a particular direction and when government is trying to encourage a certain choice. This contrasts to other tools, such as regulation or information provision where the public have greater cognitive awareness of government's intentions (Baldwin 2014). Nudges are therefore seen as manipulative

and impinging on people's agency and autonomy (Goodwin 2012; White 2013; Wilkinson 2013).

Advocates of nudge argue it is not a manipulation of choice as people can always make an alternative choice other than the one government is pursuing. This notion of 'opting out' of the nudge is at the heart of the idea of Libertarian Paternalism – although government is directing the public to make a particular choice, people can always 'opt out' of that choice and make an alternate one. In order to be able make an alternate choice, the material and cognitive costs of the opt outs must be low (Thaler and Sunstein 2008, 8). However, it is difficult to reconcile the argument that people have the option to make alternative choices other than the one decided by the policy actor, given that nudges are built on the very principle that people will not always make considered rational choices and consider and evaluate each decision they make (Hansen and Jespersen 2013). Relatedly if nudges are covert, and people are unaware they are being directed, people may be not aware they have the option to opt out of that choice (Grüne-Yanoff and Hertwig 2016).

Libertarian Paternalism as a guiding philosophy faces other ethical challenges. In earlier work Sunstein and Thaler (2003) distinguish between Libertarian Paternalism and Libertarian Benevolence. Libertarian Paternalism considers how policy can better support decisions that make *individuals* better off, whereas Libertarian Benevolence supports policy that encourages people to make decisions that make *society* better off (Sunstein and Thaler 2003). In later works however, this distinction disappears, and instead the two seem to become conflated. I suggest this is because, practically, it is unlikely that government would nudge the public towards a decision that significantly contradicted the goals or intentions of a public policy. However, this conflation of

Libertarian Paternalism and Libertarian Benevolence also draws attention to an inconsistency where policy actors steer people towards decisions that serve policy goals but contradict personal goals. White (2013) argues that policy actors are unable to act in every person's interest, as they cannot be aware of and consider each individual's own situation, values and preferences. They also cannot take into account the wide variety of situations and reasons why an individual may not want to make a particular choice. In this way policy actors cannot know whether they are nudging people to make choices that make them better off (White 2013).

This reflects assertions that behavioural insights teams have an ethical responsibility for the choices they are encouraging people to make (Delaney 2018). Policy actors have a central role in behavioural insights as they design the policy and choose which behaviour to influence, and what form they want the desired behaviour to take. Gigerenzer (2015) argues that nudging requires an ideal-type benevolent policy maker when designing nudge policies, who does not suffer from the same cognitive biases and have no conflict of interest. These policy makers need to be exempt from cognitive biases so they can identify the errors people make, but also not make errors themselves about which interventions are needed. However, policy actors are also subject to the same biases and lack of rationality as the people they are nudging (Angner 2015). In addition, policy actors often act in self-defence, may not always understand scientific evidence, and suffer from both individual and organisational conflicts of interest (Gigerenzer 2015). For example, policy actors appear to favour 'exploitative' nudges that use System 1 thinking and cognitive biases and heuristics, over 'educative' type nudges which seek to overcome System 1 biases, and encourage reflective, informed choice. By avoiding educative nudges that help people learn to overcome biases, policy actors extend people's System 1 thinking so these

can be used to influence behaviour in the future (Hertwig and Ryall 2016). The influence of the policy actor therefore may not only be on the one-off choices of the public, but extend to influencing people long term. That is, the policy actor has the responsibility for nudges that may make people develop long term preferences (Hausman and Welch 2010).

As examined above, public servants may also hinder implementation of nudge policies as they may be resistant to new policy approaches (Stoker 2012). Stoker (2012) discusses how the values of policy actors in implementing nudge can impact on the successful implementation of nudges. If actors disagree with the values underpinning nudge – such that they are viewed – they may be less willing to adopt the approach. If nudges are seen as a soft form of intervention that is manipulative, as it is covert, they may be less interested in adopting the approach. Stoker argues that a framework should be implemented that allows policy actors to consider the ethical and value issues of nudging in the design of a nudge policy (Stoker 2012). A number of frameworks have been developed for policy actors to support the consideration of these ethical issues. These include frameworks released by the OECD (OECD 2019), academics (Lades and Delaney 2020) and Cass Sunstein, one of the authors of nudge (Sunstein and Reisch 2019).

A further challenge to the use of behavioural insights is that policy actors and teams using behavioural insights may not have democratic or bureaucratic oversight. That is, policy actors may implement behavioural insights techniques without the awareness or approval of the public or heads of government. The approach discourages deliberation as it is 'invisible' (Lepenieš and Małecka 2020). The place of behavioural insights in democratic frameworks has also been the focus of recent

scholarly attentions (Strassheim 2020). This includes the role of experts in behavioural insights and behavioural insights as a technocracy (Feitsma 2018). In response to criticisms that nudge and behavioural insights is undemocratic and paternalistic, some academics have proposed behavioural insights approaches that are more inclusive and deliberative. “Collaborative nudging” for example includes community consensus on nudging in the design and potential application of projects (Whitehead, Jones, and Pykett 2020). This approach includes engagement on societal goals and is positioned as a way of empowering citizens in decision making. John (John 2018) has suggested an enhanced nudge, called nudge plus. This type of nudge places more importance on encouraging deliberation over choices rather than making use of biases and heuristics in thinking. It is a “more citizen-orientated model for behavioural public policy” (John and Stoker 2019, 210). However, while some behavioural insights teams are moving towards more inclusive approaches, others are adhering or reinforcing a more technocratic approach (Strassheim 2021) which emphasise biases in policy making. I explore some of these issues in the next chapter as they relate to the different type of knowledge that are included in policy making processes.

2.6.2 The effectiveness of behavioural insights and nudging

The effectiveness of nudge as a public policy tool to enact change has been questioned. Thaler and Sunstein (2008) argue that nudging is a more effective mode of governing, yet the evidence for this is not clear (Kosters and Van der Heijden 2015). Some work, such as that by Benartzi et al. (2017) has suggested that nudges are more cost-effective than other traditional policy tools, while meta-analysis of the literature suggests that effectiveness may differ by types of nudges (Hummel and Maedche 2019) or the domain (Jachimowicz et al. 2019). Quigley and Farrell (2019) have

questioned the empiricism behind the evidence base of nudge. This includes challenges to the evidence produced by Behavioural Insights Teams through randomised control trials, which I explore in the next chapter, and challenges with using evidence found 'in the lab' and applying these in policy settings.

Neo-classical economists argue that many of the 'big' issues facing society are best addressed with traditional approaches to policies, including regulation and incentives (Angner 2015) and nudge cannot provide the type of transformative change needed to address problems such as obesity or climate change (Goodwin 2012). The focus on nudge may also be problematic in that it diverts attention (and budget) away from interventions that are potentially more effective (Barrett 2011). Nudges tends to address downstream problems (that is, an outcome of inequality), rather than upstream initiatives (the cause of the inequality), and therefore are limited in their ability to make transformative changes (Cheung and Ardolino 2011; Quigley 2013). For example, as part of a program to encourage healthy eating, government could nudge people to 'choose fruit in a cafeteria', but this does not address the socio-economic causes of obesity (Baldwin 2014). Indeed, a critique of nudging is that it does not consider structural drivers of problems or socio cultural differences in the population it is nudging (Barrett 2011; Brown 2012). Nor does nudge take into account all possible influences on behaviour – it does not consider for example, the emotional aspects of behaviour (Stoker 2012).

An academic special issue on the state of behavioural insights outlined some of the key issues of the effectiveness of behavioural insights in policy making. These include many of the challenges facing behavioural economics as a discipline, such as whether behaviour changes from behavioural insights interventions persist over the long term,

and whether repeated exposure to behavioural insights interventions or nudges reduces their effects (Sanders, Snijders, and Hallsworth 2018). Of particular importance to my research on how knowledge shapes voices in public policy is the WEIRD debate. WEIRD refers to 'Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Developed'. Many of the principles of behavioural insights are developed from academic research which is tested on undergraduate students that are located primarily in western industrialised countries (Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010). These students are typically 'WEIRD' however, many of the targets of behavioural insights interventions are not. The lack of applicability of findings in the lab to real world settings brings into questions the effectiveness of these behavioural insights intervention. The differences in the cultural contexts may also influence the effectiveness of the interventions. For example, there is evidence that one of the principles of behavioural insights, social norming, has greater influence in some societies than others (Sanders, Snijders, and Hallsworth 2018).

These two persistent criticisms of the ethics, efficiency and effectiveness of behavioural insights have important implications on governance practices in Australia. If nudges are not effective, they may divert policy actors' attention, and resources, away from traditional policy instruments. If they are unethical, they may impinge upon people's agency and autonomy. I have outlined these issues to reinforce not only the context for the research but to demonstrate the importance of behavioural insights as an area of focus.

2.7 CONCLUSION

These debates raise important questions on the ethical and effectiveness implications of behavioural insights for policy making. Nonetheless, the use of behavioural insights

continues to grow in Australia and overseas and as an area of scholarly focus. While there is limited consensus on what constitutes behavioural insights, I have argued that behavioural insights can be understood as an approach to policy making that uses research from the social sciences, psychology and behavioural economics about behaviour and decision making and applies these to policy, with an emphasis on evidence and empirical testing. Behavioural insights has emerged in administrations familiar with behavioural theories from academic research and with a focus on using evidence to develop and implement policy. In the next chapter I examine the literature on the role of evidence and knowledge in public policy.

3 CHAPTER 3: A FOCUS ON KNOWLEDGE IN PUBLIC POLICY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I consider the role of knowledge in public policy. I argue for an important distinction between knowledge and evidence. As described in the introduction, in this chapter and thesis, I use the term knowledge to describe the interpretation or use of information, data, belief or experience, and evidence as a label for that knowledge. I critically examine the literature on knowledge and evidence to provide the rationale for making this distinction, which I apply in my empirical analysis. I examine the types of knowledge in public policy and develop a typology of knowledge from the literature. This typology includes technical, local, craft or normative knowledge. I consider how these knowledges can be used in public policy. I suggest that the categories of instrumental, political and conceptual, based on Weiss (1979) meanings of knowledge utilisation, provide a useful framework for examining the literature. I examine the knowledge utilisation and evidence-based policy literature using these categories, including where possible literature on this knowledge use in behavioural insights, noting the gaps throughout.

3.2 KNOWLEDGE IN PUBLIC POLICY

The role of knowledge has been a central focus of policy analysis since Harold Laswell, the founder of the policy sciences, argued for the study of “knowledge in and of the policy process.” (Fischer and Miller 2006 xix). In the 1950s, Laswell envisioned knowledge would guide policy and support decision making. This vision incorporated a range of types of knowledge (Fischer and Miller 2006). This study of the role of knowledge has been driven by a desire to understand the influence of scholars’ research on public policy (Weiss 1979) and investigate reasons why an increase in

outputs of social sciences research did not seem to be improving policy outcomes (Head 2010b).

Both academics and government actors assert that knowledge is vital to improving policy. Knowledge can be used to examine policy outputs, measure the magnitude of policy problems, design policy interventions, test policy solutions and evaluate their impact (Weiss 1979; Head 2010a; Boaz and Davies 2019). As I discuss in this chapter, an absence of knowledge in policy making is sometimes lamented as policy made for political or ideological reasons. Policy actors draw on different types of knowledge in policy making as they make sense of and shape policy processes (Colebatch, Hoppe, and Noordegraaf 2010). The use of different types of knowledge in policy activity is also a way of bringing attention to issues and shapes how policy problems are framed, influencing which voices are heard (Jasanoff 1987; Fischer 2000; Yanow 2004).

3.2.1 Types of knowledge

In this section I first outline four types of knowledge in public policy, technical, local, craft and normative, noting the challenges with trying to define categories of knowledge. The aim of this section is not to resolve debates on the distinctiveness or otherwise of knowledge. Rather I aim to synthesise these for clarity in the thesis, and provide a framework for analysing the practices of behavioural insights.

3.2.1.1 Technical knowledge

Technical knowledge has been described as technical-professional, scholarly, scientifically constructed, and abstracted (Yanow 2004). It is the scientific knowledge that corresponds to the Aristotelian knowledge or virtue of *episteme* (Flyvbjerg 2011).

Episteme is ahistorical and not contingent on context. Such technical knowledge might be described as “concrete” (Daviter 2015) or “rational-instrumental” (Parsons 2004). Technical and instrumental knowledge is associated with expert knowledge (Fischer 2000, 43) and with research knowledge in public policy and policy analysis. The knowledge produced by professionally trained and recognised experts for governments in expert and consulting reports may be considered technical knowledge. Technical knowledge is framed as verifiable, or falsifiable, and subject to experimental methods (Emmert 1985) and thus linked to scientific ideas such as causality (Fay 1975; Tenbensen 2006a). It is,

the product of systematic analysis of current and past conditions and trends, and analysis of the causal inter-relationships that explain conditions and trends (Head 2008, 6).

Policy actors ‘aspire’ to use or produce technical knowledge by rational and technical methods (Tenbensen 2006). These methods of technical knowledge production reflect positivist philosophies that data is able to be discovered and researched objectively (Yanow 2006a). In this approach, politics and social issues are constructed as technical problems which require scientific evidence obtained through surveys and cost-benefit analysis in order to discover administrative and technical solutions (Fischer 2006). Advocates argue that using technical and scientific knowledge can help develop better policies. For example, data from evaluating program outcomes can help demonstrate whether a program is beneficial or if it needs to be changed or terminated. This is discussed further below in the context of the evidence-based policy movement.

In public policy, technical knowledge is typically associated with instrumental rationality in policy processes. Historically, social scientists' desire for the policy sciences to be taken seriously underpinned the framing of policy knowledge as a rational, scientific endeavour. In behavioural insights literature Herbert Simon is most often credited with introducing the concept of bounded rationality in policy and advocating for a closer link between psychology in public policy. However, he also influenced the epistemologically positivist stance of public policy (Hortal 2017) and advocated for "genuine", observable science (Cruise 1997). Yet, the epistemological foundations' of technical knowledge have been questioned. Critics argue that technical knowledge cannot be objective, ahistorical, or apolitical, as the facts studied by scientists are determined by the methods available and that which is seen as valid within that time and discipline. They are also subject to those who have the power to determine research agendas (Jasanoff 2003). Facts are agreed through consensus building not empirical testing (Jasanoff 1987). Facts also require, and are acquired through, interpretation or sense-making. Actors (or knowers) bring their own experiences and knowledge, acquired through education, family, and culture, to the sense-making and thus technical knowledge always entails some degree of interpretation (Yanow 2000). Lindblom and Cohen (1979) argue that ordinary knowledge, which is common sense and thoughtful speculation, is used to assess and interpret technical knowledge. They claim that technical knowledge supplements ordinary knowledge and that any advances in technical knowledge can only ever be incremental to the vast amount of ordinary knowledge that exists and is employed including by technical professionals. Local knowledge is a specific type of ordinary knowledge (Fischer 2000), which I discuss in the following section.

3.2.1.2 Local knowledge

Technical knowledge is often contrasted with local or ordinary knowledge. I consider here two definitions of local knowledge offered by influential policy scholars Dvora Yanow and Frank Fischer. Local knowledge is the,

mundane, expert understanding of and practical reasoning about local conditions derived from lived experience (Yanow 2000, 5).

knowledge about a local context or setting, including empirical knowledge of specific characteristics, circumstances, events, and relationships, as well as the normative understandings of their meaning (Fischer 2000, 146).

I suggest that these two definitions illustrate that local knowledge is comprised of two components, the empirical and normative. The empirical component included in Fischer's definition seems to correspond to the "expert understanding" in Yanow's definition. The normative component is reflected in Fischer's "normative understandings" and aligns with the "practical reasoning" referred to in Yanow's description. Yanow (2004) has elaborated in her work how this practical reasoning component of local knowledge relates to the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis* or normative knowledge which I discuss further below. In public policy, local knowledge has normative connotations (Rhodes 2016a). It is seen as a way to 'improve' policy making. Local knowledge then may be interpreted as knowledge of local issues derived from experience (empirical local knowledge) and knowledge of what should be done (normative reasoning). I note this distinction in order to untangle the different components of knowledge for my framework below.

Local knowledge is dynamic and tacit. It is not codified, as when it is formalised or systematised it is no longer local knowledge (Rhodes 2017, 177). Local knowledge also includes indigenous knowledge and efforts to devalue indigenous perspectives may have contributed to the privileging of scientific knowledge (Fischer 2000). In local knowledge, local can refer to geographically local or confined to particular communities (Rhodes 2017) but it can also mean local “in a policy issues sense” (Yanow 2000, 14). In an organisational setting, Yanow (2004,13) describes local knowledge as the “mundane, largely tacitly known, experiential knowledge developed among a community of practitioners in regular interaction around a particular object or focus”. The examples she provides in her paper are of actors in the organisational periphery of a workplace and are compared to street level bureaucrats. This suggests that local knowledge might also be developed by policy actors in government, derived from their experiences in public administration. Here local knowledge blurs or overlap with craft knowledge in government bureaucracies, which I discuss further below.

Yanow (2003a) has described how local knowledge can be accessed through interviews to understand the meaning of policies to communities and understand the consequences of a policy on that community. Such knowledge can then inform more technical processes of policy analysis, for example the policy design. Local knowledge in public policy can be seen in the drawing of community experiences in co-design processes. Co-design engages communities’ local knowledge to find solutions for challenging policy problems (Blomkamp 2018). In health care for example, patients may share their experiences in the development of care initiatives in the areas of cancer, addiction and mental health (Donetto et al. 2015). In general, local knowledge is associated with qualitative research and data, as local knowledge is accessed through qualitative methods such as interviewing and ethnographic research (Yanow

2003a). In an example of the importance of local knowledge in policy making, Yanow (2003a) draws on the example of a policy designed to address drought conditions. Nomadic tribesmen were encouraged to dig more wells, however this had the unintended consequence of exacerbating the issue, as an increased number of wells encouraged the tribesman to grow their herds. This example illustrates the consequences of a policy when local knowledge of the affected communities does not shape policy making (Yanow 2003a).

3.2.1.3 Craft knowledge

Craft knowledge seems to overlap or blur with local knowledge. Both are derived from experience and are concerned with the expert understanding of the minutiae of the day to day as well as ethical and normative questions. For example, Rhodes (Rhodes 2016a) suggests local knowledge can be used as advice for policy actors collected through policy narratives or to make silent voices heard in policy making. He also suggests that street level bureaucrats use local knowledge in policy implementation (Rhodes 2017, 175). In organisational settings, this knowledge has also been described as local (Yanow 2004). I suggest craft knowledge may be understood as a type or form of local knowledge specific to public administrations. However, craft knowledge explicitly acknowledges and encompasses the political climate of bureaucracies and the relationship between politics and public administration. Whereas local or ordinary knowledge may be how policy actors assess technical knowledge (Lindblom and Cohen 1979; Yanow 2000) craft knowledge is how other knowledge types (such as research based or local knowledge) are chosen as evidence (Fleming and Rhodes 2018).

Rhodes (2016b,639) argues that craft knowledge is central to public servants' work. He notes "Public administration is...a profession based on craft knowledge". It involves the technical knowledge about a craft, but also encompasses experience or experiential knowledge and is interpreted as equally important as formal knowledge. Craft knowledge in public policy may be found in the knowledge of front-line workers who have worked in an area for a long time and the drawing on this knowledge to consider resolving local problems (Bynner and Terje 2021). It involves the small p politics that bureaucrats need to get their jobs done (Rhodes 2016b).

Craft knowledge is also tacit, not codified or found in a manual. Rhodes (2016b) identifies seven skills comprising craft knowledge that are used in public policy by public servants. These are outlined in Table 3-1 below, and include counselling and stewardship, probity, diplomacy and political nous. Some craft skills, such as practical wisdom and judgement seem akin to constructions of normative knowledge, which I examine in the following section.

Table 3-1

Craft Skill	Description
Counselling	Drawing on experience and institutional memory to challenge politicians and speaking truth to power
Stewardship	Ensuring continuity for government, preserving the institutions mission and integrity
Practical wisdom	Using experience and institutional memory to make recommendations. This is the 'core' of the craft
Probity	Moral principles, particularly honesty, decency and loyalty. Implicit is that loyalty is to the politician
Judgement	How practical wisdom is used, to weigh and consider different accounts, as science 'cannot provide the answers'.
Diplomacy	Encompassing empathy and negotiation, boundary spanning
Political nous	Understanding and ability to negotiate the political (small p) environment

Craft knowledge has also been described by other scholars. Tenbensen (2006) makes the connection between *techne* and tacit knowledge. *Techne* is the second of the Aristotelian knowledge or virtue category and is 'practical-technical knowledge'. *Techne* is contextual, but also aligns with an instrumental rationality of understanding how to apply technical knowledge and skills towards achieving a particular goal. Tenbensen argues that this type of knowledge is more than an understanding of how to apply epistemic knowledge technically. It is closer to tacit knowledge, and is associated with craft (Tenbensen 2006). Colebatch et al. (2010) also describe how policy work encompasses both the experiential knowledge learnt on the job by practitioners and the codified, detached knowledge of the academic. Craft knowledge then can also be described as policy actor's knowledge, learnt on the job, encompassing in part how to use technical knowledge.

3.2.1.4 Normative knowledge

Normative knowledge is a component of local knowledge (Fischer 2000) and is referred to in the practical reasoning in Yanow's definition which she links to *phronesis* (Yanow 2004). Thus, I build on the idea of *phronesis* as normative knowledge. Flyvbjerg (2011) advocates for the development and application of *phronesis* in the social sciences. It sits alongside *episteme* (scientific knowledge) and *techne* (practical-technical knowledge). Developed from Aristotle's philosophy there is much scholarly debate on exactly what is meant by *phronesis* (for example, see Ruderman 1997). Here I take *phronetic* inquiry to be centrally concerned with "deliberation about (including questioning of) values and interests aimed at *praxis*" (Schram 2006, 71). *Phronesis* moves beyond the scientific and technical to reflect on values and ethics, and the practical-ethical decisions actors must make (Tenbensen 2006). *Phronesis* involves the ability to judge how to achieve a certain end and the ability to reflect upon

and determine good ends (Petersén and Olsson 2015, 1584). The ability or the authority to make such judgements is derived from local knowledge and experience. For example, the ability to determine the 'right action' is derived from an "intimate familiarity" with the context. This intimate familiarity is linked to local and tacit knowledge but importantly phronesis "seeks the ability to push for change" (Schram 2012, 17).

Thus while phronesis may be constituted as local knowledge, it is this 'push for change' and reflection on ethics and values that creates a different emphasis from other knowledges. In public policy, phronesis may be displayed when practitioners determine what should be done based on their experience and their intimate familiarity with the context. For example, in social work, normative knowledge of work values and power imbalances can be drawn on to understand the impact of changes and how to make changes for those who need it most (Petersén and Olsson 2015).

3.3 A TYPOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGES

Often types of knowledge are framed as distinct categories. Flyvbjerg (2011) argues that each category, episteme, phronesis and techne is distinct, or mutually exclusive. Tenbensen articulates that each type of knowledge has its own norms and practices and does not seem to question the distinctions made between these knowledges (Tenbensen 2006). However, I have argued in this section that the types of knowledge overlap and blur. As I have discussed above, technical knowledge may not be separate from local knowledge and local knowledge may be a type of craft knowledge. Normative knowledge is also a component of local knowledge. Both techne (Tenbensen 2006) and phronesis (Fischer 2009) have been aligned with the ideas of craft. Weiss (1991) seems to suggest that knowledge can move between types, from

technical research knowledge (data) to ideas (the story of the data) and then to argument, which introduces more of a normative stance. In Table 3-2 I outline a framework of knowledge in public policy derived from the literature. This is not exhaustive and I acknowledge the challenges in trying to disentangle knowledges which, epistemologically, may not be discrete. However, based on the literature, I have articulated the more distinctive elements of each knowledge category and other ways this knowledge may be framed or labelled. I see this as a necessary heuristic for examining the literature on knowledge utilisation and the use of knowledge in behavioural insights, as well as analysis for my empirical chapters.

These categories mirror those offered by Brian Head in his work on evidence-based policy (Head 2010b). He suggests there is scientific knowledge in policy making, which I have termed technical knowledge. He also uses the category of professional knowledge, which contributes to understanding of the potential for different policy approaches. This could be categorised as craft knowledge. His description of experiential knowledge of service users aligns to local knowledge, that is, the knowledge service users have from their experience of using the service. This typology usefully draws attention to the importance of recognising the different types of knowledge in policy making. However, this framework seems to conflate the type of knowledge with its use, for example political knowledge is used by 'political leaders and their organisations' (Head 2010b, 83). For the purposes of my thesis, where I am seeking to understand how different types of knowledge may be used in various ways, I use the framework I have developed below.

Table 3-2

Knowledge type	Description	Corresponding to	In public policy
Technical knowledge	Research based, scientific knowledge that is seen to be objective.	Episteme, academic work, data, scientific, universal, independent, apolitical, ahistorical,	Randomised control trials, cost-benefit analysis, quantitative surveys, national statistics, department data sets
Local knowledge	Local (community) knowledge, derived from experience, understandings of the everyday, of the local.	Knowledge of communities and the public, of silenced voices and clients. It is situated, contextual, historical, community (as defined) bounded	Service users lived experiences, co-design to engage policy targets in developing interventions based on their local knowledge
Craft knowledge	Knowledge of the policy and political processes deployed by policy actors in their job roles. It is derived	Experiential knowledge of policy work, techne, local knowledge of the policy processes	How frontline workers adapt rules for service delivery based on their own experiences, the institutional memory of departments in

	from policy experience.		government that guide decision making
Normative knowledge	Knowledge and judgement of what ought to be done in public policy	Phronesis, reflections on ethics and values in policy making, the push for change	Which problems should be addressed in policy, for example smoking cessation or alcohol use

3.4 KNOWLEDGE AS EVIDENCE

Before turning to an examination of the literature on the use of knowledge and evidence-based policy, I first consider the boundaries of knowledge and evidence. Often the concept of evidence is not defined in the literature. For example, one systematic literature review on the use of evidence found more than half the studies did not define the term evidence (Oliver et al. 2014). When defined, it is usually understood as technical research knowledge. Other types of knowledge are sometimes considered or included as definitions in evidence, including tacit knowledge, experience and practice expertise. Oliver et al. (2014, 8) refer to this as “informal evidence” suggesting the privileging of technical research knowledge that I go on to discuss below.

Some organisations and institutions have attempted to define evidence using different standards or hierarchies (Nutley, Powell, and Davies 2013). These standards are often used by government administrations in determining which evidence should be more

influential in policy making. These hierarchies are usually arranged by method including for example, systematic reviews, case studies and statistical correlations or large scale ethnographic studies. Expertise and anecdotes are usually at the bottom of these hierarchies and systematic reviews and randomised control trials at the top. There has been sustained criticism of these hierarchies, including that they pay limited attention to context or power. Evidence hierarchies that privilege randomised control trials devalue other forms of evidence that include other methods and other types of knowledge. Nonetheless, they continue to be used and influential (Nutley, Davies, and Hughes 2019). Here I consider the privileging of randomised control trials in more detail as they are afforded great importance by supporters of behavioural insights, which I described in the previous chapter.

Randomised control trials often come at the top of evidence hierarchies and are described as the 'gold standard' of evidence (Nutley, Davies, and Hughes 2019). Advocates of randomised control trials argue that they are a reliable way of testing the effectiveness of an intervention (Haynes et al. 2012). These trials are able to demonstrate whether it is an intervention that causes a change in the targeted behaviour as the trial controls for other changes or variables (for example the dedication of staff or changes in the economy over time). Goldacre (2013) argues that by running a randomised control trials policy actors are able to check that an intervention is not harmful before it is applied to a broad target population. Haynes et al. 2012 have also argued that trials have the potential to save money for government in the long term, as they prevent unsuccessful interventions been applied to the population. Further, randomised control trials can be simple to implement and cost effective, potentially more cost-effective than traditional evaluation tools. The importance attached to randomised control trials is a response to a perceived

overreliance on professional experts, in medicine in particular, that were seen as unable to be questioned (Goldacre 2013). Perhaps in response to this, the evidence produced by randomised control trials is framed as objective and transparent (Pearce and Raman 2014). Thus, as noted above, randomised control trials as a form of technical knowledge make positivist assumptions about objective knowledge that it is neutral and value free (Yanow 2000).

While randomised control trials have been embraced in government policy making, the response in academic scholarship is more muted (Cowen et al. 2017). In particular Nancy Cartwright has argued randomised control trials are narrow in scope (Cartwright 2007) and only useful with other methods (Deaton and Cartwright 2018). A randomised control trial cannot guarantee that an intervention that has worked in one local situation will work in another, and the label of 'gold standard' can create overconfidence in an intervention (Cartwright 2013). In practice statistically conclusive evidence from these trials does not necessarily lead to expected policy outcomes. Further, in randomised control trials, the emphasis on technical knowledge and exclusion of local knowledge may lead street level bureaucrats to deviate and adapt the interventions that they do not see as fit for purpose (Pearce and Raman 2014). Advocates of randomised control trials acknowledge these limitations. For example, in Ben Goldacre's influential report cited above for the UK Department of Education, he notes that randomised control trials are only one type of research that can help in improving policy. He and others have noted the importance of judgement in choosing interventions for randomised control trials (Cartwright and Hardie 2012; Goldacre 2013) and the need to advocate for the method. As Pearce and Raman (2014) note, despite their framing as objective, evidence from these trials still requires interpretation and advocacy from experts.

Nonetheless the framing of randomised control trials as producing objective evidence matters. Dunlop (2016) has shown how supposedly incontestable evidence produced by randomised control trials is contested through questions of validity of a study. A randomised control trials' design, execution, and conclusions – and experimenters' qualifications, normative beliefs, and institutional affiliations – may be questioned and debated by motivated policy actors (Dunlop 2016). She argues that the authority claimed through a randomised control trial for finding *the* solution to a problem results in an absence of space for discussion of values, different policy options, or community opinion. The same facts and evidence may be used in competing narratives. The 'certainty' of the research findings leads to further politicisation of the issues rather than agreed policy outcomes.

This example of the contestation of randomised control trials highlights the 'multiple meanings' of evidence. As Head, notes "In the real world of policy-making, what counts as 'evidence' is diverse and contestable." (Head 2010b, 83). Evidence is contested and situated, and the consensus on legitimate knowledge that eventuates in one context may not in another (Pearce and Raman 2014). Nonetheless, the labelling of evidence gives that knowledge "visibility and standing" (Weiss et al. 2008, 43). Knowledge may be labelled as evidence by organisations and other authorised institutions (Nutley, Davies, and Hughes 2019) and influential stakeholders may also label knowledge as evidence giving that knowledge authority and legitimacy in policy (Fraser and Davis 2019).

The authority to 'label' evidence brings attention to the politics of evidence. What counts as evidence is shaped by those with greater authority and resources (Maddison 2012). Marginalised groups have less voice in deciding what is labelled as evidence,

yet the same evidence may also be used to develop policies and interventions directed towards them. Evidence then, is not just about ‘what works’ but “whose evidence, gets what influence, when and how” (Parsons 2002, 14). Evidence can be used to draw attention to policy problems and solutions, or conversely question the extent or nature of policy problems and even undermine or unsettle policy solutions (Cairney 2019).

Evidence is not given, but is labelled and unlabelled, or ‘made and unmade’ through a process described as a political struggle (Rhodes 2016a). Jasanoff (1987) talks about the roles of different actors claiming authority in constructing and deconstructing evidence. Researchers claim authority through professionalization and processes such as peer review, where they pass judgement on what is legitimate knowledge, at the same time sustaining how that knowledge works (Jasanoff 1987). Policy actors claim authority to be able to interpret and reconstruct scientific knowledge however, this challenges scientists’ claims that knowledge is objective, and potentially threatens their authority and resources. Both policy actors and research producers have a stake in interpreting and labelling knowledge. The drawing of boundaries between policy and science is political (Jasanoff 1987).

Evidence may be contested and political, but it has “an exalted status” (Boswell 2014, 352). It has different meanings in different contexts, and reinforces the need, in my research, to use a methodology with a focus on meaning, and how policy actors make sense of the meaning of evidence. It also highlights the importance of focussing on actors as they are interpreting and contesting evidence. I now turn to the use of knowledge and evidence in policymaking.

3.5 THE DIFFERENT USES OF KNOWLEDGE IN PUBLIC POLICY

Scholars have classified the use of knowledge in various ways in the literature, including engineering and enlightenment (Janowitz 1969), use, instrumental, opportunistic, rhetorical and conceptual (A. S. Haynes et al. 2011), influence and strategy (Boaz and Nutley 2019). Carol Weiss' (1979) influential work described seven different meanings of research knowledge, which are included in Table 3-3 below. Weiss' work (1979) sought to understand the different meanings attached to the term research utilisation (Head 2013). There have been some criticisms of her framework as lacking nuance and comprehensiveness (Boaz and Nutley 2019). Boaz and Nutley (2019) have argued that these categories or they 'meanings' are represented as distinct, whereas the use of research is fluid and may change over time. However, Weiss (1979, 430) herself noted that,

These, then, are some of the meanings that "the use of social science research" can carry. Probably all of them are applicable in some situations. Certainly none of them represents a fully satisfactory answer to the question of how a polity best mobilizes its research resources to inform public action.

Thus, her framework is not comprehensive. Weiss' framework is also derived from the study of social science research which is funded by government and used in policy (Weiss 1979). It is therefore premised and primarily focussed on research knowledge, that I have categorised as technical and a narrower construction of knowledge types than I have outlined above. Nonetheless her model is dominant (Boaz and Nutley 2019) and "persuasive" (Head 2013, 397).

Weiss' meanings have been grouped into three categories, the instrumental use of knowledge, the conceptual use of knowledge and the political use of knowledge (Boaz

and Nutley 2019). This last category has also been labelled the strategic use of knowledge, but I use the term political to draw attention to the political contestations over knowledge and evidence I have described above. In this chapter I use this framework of instrumental, political and conceptual that is based on Weiss' (1979) work as it is helpful to structure my examination of the literature on both knowledge utilisation and evidence-based policy. For example, and as I examine below, the instrumental use of knowledge refers to the application of knowledge to a specific problem or issue. It includes Weiss' knowledge-driven and problem-solving meanings, as well as scholarly debates on the use of evidence in the evidence-based policy making literature. The category of political use of knowledge refers to the political and tactical meanings, but also the symbolic use of research and the ways evidence may be used to rationalise political decisions. Conceptual use is mainly focussed on the dominant enlightenment model, and considers the way in which knowledge slowly influences ideas and perceptions of policy problems. In the remaining sections of this chapter I examine these categories drawing attention to where different types of knowledge may be considered in each, and how actors in behavioural insights may use these knowledges.

Table 3-3

Framework	Weiss	Description
Instrumental	Knowledge – Driven	A linear model of knowledge use, where the production of knowledge drives the policy change
	Problem-Solving	Research is needed to solve a policy problem. This research may be sought or commissioned by policy makers
Political	Political	Evidence may be used as support for political decisions
	Tactical	Research may be used to deflect attention or delay action to develop credentials and legitimacy
Conceptual	Enlightenment	Research comes to shape the way policy actors think about social issues and particular problems
	Intellectual Enterprise	Policy influences research and research influences policy, with both being subject to the ideas and “fashions” of the time.
	Interactive	A non-linear quest for information from a wide variety of actors, with decisions made without definitive evidence

3.5.1 The instrumental use of knowledge

The instrumental use of knowledge has been described as “specific actions taken on the basis of knowledge” (Radaelli 1995, 161). Weiss (1979) outlines two ways this instrumental use works in public policy. In Weiss’ knowledge-driven model, knowledge is created which instigates opportunities for its application and propels its use. This linear model may be the most esteemed, but is more often found in the physical sciences than the social sciences (Weiss 1979). The problem-solving model is the dominant view of research utilisation and is where “research provides empirical evidence and conclusions that help to solve a policy problem” (Weiss 1979, 427). It is also linear, in that specific research is applied to a particular problem, but here it is not the knowledge itself that influences the policy making, but rather the need for solutions to policy problems. This research may be sought by policy actors or brought to their attention. The knowledge may have been developed for other purposes so is not directly applicable or research may be directly commissioned to solve the problem.

This instrumental approach has most recently been associated with evidence-based policy making. Evidence-based policy making seeks to “place hard evidence at the heart of policy making” (Papanagnou 2011, 11). The premise of evidence-based policy making is that robust and rigorous evidence is a necessary prerequisite for well-informed policy decisions (Head 2014). Evidence, it is argued, can improve policy design and implementation and ensure policies are effective through reviews and evaluations. It is seen as “fundamental” to policy processes (Boaz and Davies 2019, 1). Evidence-based policy making is sometimes referred to as understanding “what works” (Boaz and Davies 2019).

Here I briefly consider the history of the evidence-based policy making movement. I focus on the UK and Australian administrations as Australia is where my research is based, and because of the UK Behavioural Insight Team's influence on the development of behavioural insights in Australia. As examined in the previous chapter, an important concept in behavioural insights is the use of evidence and empirically derived research and methods.

Evidence-based policy making has been shaped by evidence-based medicine, which has generated an emphasis on randomised control trials as the 'gold standard' of evidence (Marston and Watts 2003). The Cochrane Collaboration was established in 1993 and emphasised the need for a robust evidence base, particularly from randomised control trials and systematic reviews, to direct practice in medicine. The parallel collection for social sciences, the Campbell Collaboration, was subsequently established in 1999 (Bacchi 2012). In the UK, support for evidence-based policy making in government is often traced to a speech given by the politician David Blunkett. The speech both characterised and gave momentum to the movement. David Blunkett, speaking to the Economic and Social Research Council in 2000, called for social scientists to "tell us what works and why and what types of policy initiatives are likely to be most effective" (Blunkett 2000). In the speech he argued that large quantitative research was needed, accompanied by case studies. Over a decade later, and under a new Conservative government, a network of What Works Centres had been established across the UK, seeking to support the use of evidence in policy making. Many of these centres, though not all, privilege technical knowledge over other forms of knowledge (Fleming and Rhodes 2018).

In Australia, there are a number of historical factors that have shaped evidence-based policy making. In the 1980s there was a turn to New Public Management which emphasised the importance of information to be included in service delivery and prioritising effective policies, with ongoing implications for policy design, review and evaluation (Head 2014). In the following decade, with new governance approaches and the hollowing out of the state, came new consultancies and actors who needed to frame their argument as evidence-based in order to be heard when giving policy advice and to take part in debates (Head 2014). In the 1990s, as evidence-based policy making began to emerge as a movement, the Australian bureaucracy focussed on knowledge from economics and management which were underpinned by positivists assumptions (Hess and Adams 2002).

More recently, at the federal government level, evidence-based policy making has come from the need to understand and plan for complex policy challenges and trends, as well as a commitment to international organisations and networks that require ongoing data collection and evidence (Head 2010a; 2010b). In 2008, the Australian government was reinforcing its commitment to evidence-based policy making. Then-Prime Minister Kevin Rudd argued the need for ‘facts’ and trials on which to make policy decisions. He stated,

Evidence-based policy is at the heart of being a reformist government...in fostering a culture of policy innovation we should trial new approaches and policy options through small scale pilot studies. (Rudd 2008).

In 2009, the federal government released its productivity commission research paper entitled ‘Challenges of Evidence-based policy making’ (Banks 2009). The report outlined some of the criticisms of evidence-based policy making but concluded it was

important for addressing the wicked problems facing government, such as aging populations and climate change. The report also decried a lack of data from which to draw decision making or to evaluate the impact of policies, calling for more ongoing surveys and baseline data. The report argued the public sector needed to improve its “capability and expertise” (Banks 2009, 15) holding up as a “significant example” the teaching of economics to non-economists through a partnership with Monash University. These reports and rhetoric foreground the technical knowledge, with a focus on quantitative data and trials, that might fit easily into the behavioural insights approach. In the years following, there were signs of the government’s commitment to evidence-based policy making, although there are suggestions this is declining at the federal level (Head 2014). Stoker and Evans (2016) found that policy makers believe the use of evidence in policy making is falling, in part due to funding challenges. However, others have seen a continuing and steady call for policy based on evidence from politicians and the public service in Australia and internationally (Fopp 2015). The types and influence of research does vary based on the government area. Econometric data has been influential in perceptions of what counts as evidence, as have the hierarchies of evidence, and government has relied extensively on cost-effectiveness analysis. However, there is some suggestions that qualitative research has increasing legitimacy in government administrations (Head and Di Francesco 2019).

Evidence-based policy making has achieved significant support from within governments, and has staunch advocates (Oliver, Lorenc, and Innvær 2014). Even in times of fiscal austerity, the evidence-based movement seems to thrive, if not flourish. This may be because in times of limited budget spending, research to ensure effective policy is seen as even more important so that any resources are used

effectively (Boaz and Davies 2019, 7). Underpinning these arguments is the normative standpoint that research should influence policy. The normative argument suggests that an evidence-based approach, free of values and ideologies, will produce better outcomes for policy and society (Newman 2017). Such normative arguments are seen in statements such as research and evidence 'should' be used and influence policy making (Weiss et al. 2008). Leading academics in the evidence-based policy making area talk of the potential contribution that evidence can make to public services and to the 'welfare of society' (Boaz and Davies 2019).

Despite governments' rhetorical focus on evidence-based policy making, governments designed and implemented policies that were contrary to what evidence proposed (Newman 2017) and more data and more research were not leading to better outcomes on many challenging social problems (Head 2008). Some scholars suggested that these problems may be a challenge of communication between research producers and research users. Weiss (1979) talks of these two communities as 'policy makers' and 'researchers'. The theory of two communities has long been the attention of debate and scholarship (Webber 1991). Researchers are framed as the suppliers of knowledge, and are often described as academic researchers. The users of knowledge tend to be policy makers with a recognition this may exist at multiple levels of government. Failures of research to inform or direct policymaking are then categorised as problems on the supply side, the demand side, and the connection between the two (Weiss et al. 2008). Problems on the supply side include poor dissemination of research by producers of evidence (Cairney and Oliver 2017). Poor demand for research may be linked to organisational factors such as the absence of practitioners' capabilities, desires and needs for evidence (Head 2016). Weiss (1977) notes however, that such research may be irrelevant, unhelpful and limited in use and

in these cases, not using this research may be a sensible decision by the policy maker. A poor or disrupted flow of research between the supply and demand side may also contribute to poor evidence use, and thus conversely, enhancing the connection between groups leads to an improved the use of evidence. To address such challenges, organisations and institutions, including 'what works' centres and knowledge broker roles are produced to assist with ensuring the flow of evidence from supply to demand (Boaz et al. 2019, 8).

However, this language and framing of two communities does not consider, as Boaz et al. (2019) note, that researcher and user are not labels actors apply to themselves, nor does it recognise that those outside of government may also use and produce research. Moreover, such language of research producer and user, or supplier and demander does not allow space for actors who both produce and use knowledge. For example, some actors may move between the two groups, such as academics who take bureaucratic or political positions (Radaelli 1995). The theory of two communities also entrenches an interpretation of evidence that it is produced by academics and practitioners, reinforcing the validity of technical knowledge over local or craft knowledge.

However, the construction of two communities does highlight the centrality of actors to evidence-based policy making. Actors have a stake in the use of research, they are not simply passive suppliers or users of research. For example, Cairney (2016) suggests that policy actors are subject to bounded rationality and use heuristics when making decisions about policy. Researchers can be more effective in influencing policy if they frame the way research is communicated, understanding that policy actors use 'irrational' shortcuts (Cairney and Oliver 2017). Haynes (2011) also identified that

policy actors 'use' researchers in various ways, though this does not necessarily have negative connotations. I consider the framing of two communities further below, but note here that this literature demonstrates that researchers and policy makers are motivated actors, reinforcing the need in my thesis to focus on the role of policy actors and the way they make sense of knowledge and evidence.

The framing of two communities draws attention to the rationalist, linear approach to policy making proposed by the evidence-based policy making literature. The evidence-based policy making literature often assumes a linear approach to policymaking (Cairney 2019) where an increased supply and understanding of evidence will lead to improved policies (Newman 2017). This interpretation of policy making assumes that there is a set place or time at which evidence is commissioned or gathered, and this evidence is then presented to the policy maker to be used. This evidence may be used to inform a policy decision, before legislation, or in the design or implementation of a policy, as well as to assess the impact of a policy activity (Yanow 2000). One challenge with this perspective is that it ascribes to research producers the role of directing policy. In the linear conceptualisation of evidence-based policy making, researchers supply technical evidence which then directs the policy decision. However, this approach suggests scientists have the primary role in policymaking, in effect denying the legitimacy of bureaucratic policy actors and politicians to make policy decisions (Cairney 2016). Thus this approach may be undemocratic because it marginalises both the voices of the community, and the decision making role of policy actors.

Cairney (2019) argues that this ideal type of evidence use in policymaking can never be realised. Policy actors will never be able to view evidence objectively, reach consensus on policy aims, and review all the available evidence. The instrumental

view of evidence-based policy making can present an unrealistic version of policy making, one that does not take into account the politics, stakeholder pressures and framing involved in policy making (Wesselink, Colebatch, and Pearce 2014). Moreover, underpinning the evidence-based policy making literature are positivist assumptions of policy making, which assumes value free research which is separate from policy (Strassheim and Kettunen 2014). Values are not only seen as irrelevant, they cloud the objective knowledge of 'what works' (Parsons 2002). This contrasts sharply with descriptions of policy making as the "formal struggle over ideas and values" (Russell et al. 2008, 40). What evidence is produced, by whom and for whom, are all intractably tied to values, and therefore demarcating evidence and values may not be possible. Nonetheless, evidence-based policy making seems to appeal to those seeking to challenge ideology-driven policy making (Parsons 2002). The use of evidence in this way is presented as a way of providing an impediment to policy made for political reasons (Pearce and Raman 2014).

In this value-free view of policymaking, evidence is something that is produced or supplied and then used to solve policy problems. This understanding of knowledge as neutral is predicated on a positivist paradigm (Yanow 2000; Bacchi 2012; Newman 2017), which denies the contestation and labelling of evidence which I considered in the previous section. Others question the positivist assumptions of the model which starts with the discovery of problems to be solved. Problems are shaped or constructed, rather than objectively existing (Bacchi 2009). The positivist assumptions underpinning evidence-based policy making may also explain the privileging of technical knowledge which is observed in evidence-based policy making.

At the beginning of this section, I included a quote that evidence-based policy making puts 'hard' evidence at the heart of policymaking. This illustrates how 'hard' evidence, which is described as large quantitative studies or reviews, is privileged in these constructions of evidence-based policy making (Papanagnou 2011). Evidence-based policy making is seen as favouring quantitative data and information over other forms of knowledge (Wesselink, Colebatch, and Pearce 2014). Traditionally, the information provided by researchers to policy makers is technical or expert knowledge, with local knowledge either ignored or seen as unimportant (Yanow 2000). Technical knowledge may be more prevalent in policy making because, practically, other forms of knowledge are not able to be easily gathered and collected (Newman 2017). For example, Parsons argues in evidence-based policy making, evidence "is that which can be aggregated and disseminated: added up, joined up and wired up" (Parsons 2002, 46). This emphasis on research and data, on science and statistics, may exclude other forms of knowledge, such as political knowledge, the experience and expertise of policy-makers, and the perspectives of clients and stakeholders (Head 2010a).

The focus on technical knowledge has practical implications. Weiss et al. (2008) found that when the use of evidence-based programs is mandated, local knowledge and local experience are discounted and the programs disregard context. Her research suggested that when something is labelled 'evidence-based' its use overrides local knowledge which challenged the appropriateness and effectiveness of the program. She argues that "professional judgement", which could be a form of practical wisdom and tacit knowledge, should be incorporated in decision making. In her study the use of the evidence-based program was mandated and tied to funding, but it draws attention to how the label of 'evidence-based' seems to marginalise other knowledges.

Beyond programs, the focus on technical knowledge and framing of evidence-based policy as value-free has serious consequences for some communities. Maddison (2012) has shown that for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the focus on statistics devalues Indigenous local knowledge and perspectives. Claims as to what counts as evidence is usually made by other, privileged voices. This can lead to an entrenchment of paternalistic, problematic policies and institutional inequality (Maddison 2012).

Including local knowledge is a way of accessing practical wisdom and judgement from communities that can shape policy making. The use of local knowledge is seen as more democratic, as it recognises that communities have the knowledge and expertise to influence the policy or practice, rather than having a technical expert make decisions for them (Yanow 2007). Local knowledge recognises that communities are the experts in their own lives. Not including such perspectives through the privileging of technical knowledges then undermines claims of ideologically free policy making, as the reliance on technical knowledge values the expert above the community. Marginalising local normative knowledge and privileging technical knowledge may be a political act.

In recent debates, the evidence-based policy making movement has seemed to embrace other knowledges. This has been driven by a growing recognition that for more complex problems, other types of knowledge were needed (Head 2008). Including other knowledges, such as local knowledge and experiential knowledge can ensure more effective policy, as different perspectives are included in policy design and in understanding a policy's impact. For example, without local knowledge of a situation, it is argued, a problem cannot really be effectively understood or solved

(Fischer 2000). Others have suggested that policy should be informed by a broad conception of evidence that includes professional expertise (Parsons 2002; Head 2008). Nutley et al. (2019) have recently argued that other sources of knowledge need to be considered alongside research based evidence in order to complete 'the picture'. They note that methods incorporating such knowledge tend to fall at the bottom of the hierarchies of evidence, which can lead to them been devalued in policy and practice (Nutley, Davies, and Hughes 2019).

The inclusion of other knowledges as evidence in policy making does seem to vary by area. For example, in social care other types of knowledge are deemed important, including the knowledge held by policy communities and practitioners, users of services and carer communities (Nutley, Davies, and Hughes 2019). In policing, Fleming and Rhodes (2018) talk about how evidence, or research knowledge, is interwoven with local and political knowledge in decision making. They argue that actors draw on different types of knowledge, such as research-based, craft and political knowledge, which are woven together in their practice. Technical or research-based evidence is only one source of knowledge that is assessed through an actor's experience (Fleming and Rhodes 2018). Other examples are seen in health prevention. Tenbensen (2006) argues that "a central requirement of policy work is the task of stitching together phronetic, epistemic and practical-technical knowledge". Using the example of anti-smoking campaigns, he argues that policy claims are more successful if they rely on epistemic arguments (such as the damaging effects of second hand smoke published in academic journals), research on the practicalities of implementing such a ban (techne), as well as phronesis, supported by surveys of attitudes to smoking bans.

The inclusion of multiple knowledge types is suggested in some descriptions of evidence-based policy making. Parsons (2002) argues evidence-based policy making is the management of episteme and techne. He characterises episteme as academic and research evidence, typically quantitative, which provides theories or shows causality for 'what works'. This is overwhelmingly quantitative research. Techne is described as the professional and institutional experience with a practical focus on understating how to make 'what works' work. Techne here is about systems to manage knowledge. Both types of knowledge are systematised, codified and explicit (contrasting perhaps to craft knowledge which is implicit). Evidence is shared within government, for example through case studies, and evidence-based policy making then becomes a way of managing knowledge (Parsons 2002). This intertwining of knowledges suggests that although evidence-based policy making emphasises the instrumental application of technical knowledge, this knowledge is rarely used on its own. Rather, it is interwoven or used alongside other types of knowledge, whether this be local knowledge or craft knowledge. This reflects discussions in the section above in this chapter on the blurring of local and technical knowledge. This is also illustrated in the quote below, where Yanow (2000) argues that policy makers draw on other types of knowledges when interpreting, or making sense of technical knowledge in the policy context, arguing,

knowledge is acquired through interpretation, which necessarily is "subjective": it reflects the education, experience, and training, as well as the individual, familial, and communal background, of the "subject" making the analysis. Not only analysts, but all actors in a policy situation (as with other aspects of the social world), interpret issue data as they seek to make sense of the policy. (Yanow 2000, 5)

This again brings attention to the way in which actors interpret and draw upon different types of knowledges, reinforcing the need for an approach to this thesis that considers the interpretations of policy actors.

The inclusion of other knowledges and a recognition that policy is unlikely to be based purely on technical evidence has seen some academics promote the label of *evidence-informed* policy (Boaz et al. 2019). This movement seeks to include other types of knowledge, such as experiential or professional knowledge and acknowledges the politics and values involved in policy making. Yet Boaz and Davies (2019) assert that while expertise, wisdom and other types of knowledge may have a place in policy, research-based knowledge is still central and privileged. Similarly, Head (2013, 398), in writing about evidence-informed policy, states that technical knowledge “has to contend with business, political and professional understandings about the nature of the problem”, implying that while there may be other knowledges present, technical knowledge should still be the primary influence in decision making. Moreover, evidence-informed policy still seems to hold other knowledges to technical standards. Rhodes (2016) argues that the standards for technical quantitative research knowledge should not apply for local knowledge. He argues their purposes are different, and thus criteria such as reliability and validity do not apply. However, evidence-informed policy holds both qualitative (which is usually associated with local knowledge) and quantitative knowledge to the same standards. These standards are usually associated with scientific credibility such as internal and external validity, reliability and replicability (triangulation been the exception) (Fraser and Davis 2019, 198). The credibility of knowledge is attained through

the careful, explicit, rigorous examination of data; the building on previous knowledge; the use of properly articulated theoretical frameworks both to guide data collection and to aid data analysis; and the transparency and scrutiny that come from clear statements of methods and conscientious peer review (Boaz and Davies 2019, 191)

Thus, although the evidence-based or evidence-informed movement seems to be embracing broader knowledges, it still privileges research based, technical knowledge, potentially excluding broader and marginalised perspectives.

3.5.1.1 Behavioural insights as an instrumental use of knowledge

Behavioural insights seems to be predicated on instrumental assumptions about the use of knowledge in policy making (Feitsma and Whitehead 2019). For example, it assumes an instrumental rationality of supply and demand of behavioural insights knowledge between academic institutions and government (Feitsma 2018). This instrumental application is also illustrated through the intertwining of behavioural insights and evidence-based policy making in literature and government documentation about the approaches, which I noted in the context chapter. For example, behavioural insights has been framed as “a powerful tool to reshape and design new evidence-based policy” (Kuehnhanss 2018, 1). The establishment of the Behavioural Insights Team by David Cameron’s Conservative Government was in part a reflection of the UK government’s commitment to evidence-based policy making (Strassheim and Kettunen 2014).

As discussed above, evidence-based policy making and the instrumental application of knowledge focuses on technical knowledge. This is also seen in behavioural insights, which is 'science-led' (John and Stoker 2019). The evidence used in behavioural insights have been described as a "body of facts" that are not able to be questioned (Strassheim and Korinek 2016, 116). This underpins the positivist assumptions made in behavioural insights of evidence as objective and incontestable. Behavioural insights deploys easily understood graphs and charts of randomised control trials comparing control groups to the intervention, and consequently actors without knowledge of the scientific methodologies can understand the impact of these interventions. Alongside heuristics and biases that are easily understood by policy actors, the evidence for behavioural insights is seen as persuasive (Strassheim and Korinek 2016). The framing of knowledge as scientific and technical has led to labels of behavioural insights as a form of technocracy (Ball and Head 2021; Feitsma 2018).

This technocratic approach is reflected in the emphasis of behavioural insights on the use of randomised control trials which I described in the previous chapter. In Australia, behavioural insights teams are focussed on the use of randomised control trials. Ball and Head (2021) undertook a number of interviews with policy makers in the Australian federal and state behavioural insights teams. They found that the teams were committed to randomised control trials as the gold standard, which was illustrated through their practice and selection of projects and capabilities of team members. Ball and Head (2020) argue that this focus on randomised control trials serves to build an evidence base and test if an intervention is effective before rolling it out more widely. They argue that policy makers present a view of linear rational policymaking, where more and better evidence will lead to improved policy outcomes. In the study the authors note that this technocratic approach may exclude or devalue experiential

knowledge, of both professionals and “weaker actors”. Although in their paper it is not articulated who these weaker actors are, they also discuss how policy makers are aware of the political environment and their need to operate within it. This study usefully questions the model of a rational, instrumental application of evidence to policy making, however it does not consider other ways in which knowledge, and other knowledges may influence policy. This study raises questions as to how these actors interpret and interweave other types of knowledge in behavioural insights.

The devaluing of other knowledges in behavioural insights is illustrated through the following excerpt from the UK Behavioural Insight Team’s paper on randomised control trials. The team assert,

many trials also involve the collection of qualitative data to help explain the findings, support future implementation, and act as a guide for further research or improving the intervention. This is not necessary, but if qualitative research is planned anyway, it is ideal to do it in relation to the same participants as those in the trial, since there may then be more information available. (Haynes et al. 2012, 30)

Here other types of research, such as qualitative research, are deemed “not necessary”. More recently the team shared a blog post where they assert that although randomised control trials are the central focus of their work, they are also more regularly using qualitative research (Behavioural Insights Team 2016). Thus while local and normative knowledges are marginalised in behavioural insights practices (Feitsma and Whitehead 2019), there are some indications that local knowledge and

expertise are slowly been introduced into behavioural insights. This includes examples where community expertise is incorporated the design of policies (Ball and Feitsma 2020) as well as instances of using co-design (Ball and Head 2021). Feitsma (2018) for example has described collaborative approaches to nudges, one of which urged communities to develop urban nudges. He also included an example in this paper on how a school principal drew on his craft knowledge and experiences of the school, rather than experimental methods when using behavioural insights. However, the focus in this paper was challenging claims on technocracy and psychocracy in nudges rather than how types of knowledges are used.

As noted in the introduction, Feitsma is one of the few scholars who has focussed on the role of policy actors and knowledge in behavioural insights. Feitsma (2019), has suggested that policy actors using behavioural insights should be framed as knowledge brokers. He argues while behavioural insights assume an instrumental rationality when applied to policy, in practice these brokers operate in a messy, non-linear environment, reflected in their roles. He has argued that knowledge brokers work to develop “political administrative legitimacy” (Feitsma 2020, 164). He suggests that some policy actors use professional assessment in developing interventions, rather than strictly technical knowledge and may also draw on ‘softer’ evidence such as focus groups and interviews to understand a policy problem. Such actors may act as missionaries building awareness of behavioural insights and allies to the approach. Although based in the Netherlands his work usefully draws attention to how other types of knowledge may be used in behavioural insights in the Australian context. However, although his research also focusses on the role of behavioural insights practitioners, he draws on the theory of knowledge brokers, rather than a specific focus on knowledge utilisation and how policy actors interpret and make sense of types of

knowledge. Nonetheless, this research reinforces the concept that policy actors are also political actors and that they themselves may be using such tools or approaches politically. As Dunlop argues (2016) policy actors, such as those in behavioural insights, have a stake in the issue.

While there is thus some suggestion that other knowledges are included in behavioural insights, this seems to be limited and curtailed by the need to produce technical evidence, at least for behavioural insights that is “frontstage” (Ball and Feitsma 2020). Moreover, if qualitative research is used, it is often not included in publicly available reports (Ball and Head 2021). This seems to reinforce the devaluing of other knowledge and research. Local knowledge may be overlooked in behavioural insights because such knowledge cannot be systematised or codified and therefore passed on as the body of work of behavioural insights (Feitsma 2018). However, I suggest it may also be excluded because it contradicts the construction of context-free knowledge that behavioural insights presents. For example, one advantage of behavioural insights and nudges are that they are a cost-effective approach to policy making. This advantage could be challenged if the approach is situated, and requires local knowledge to tailor and customise each intervention.

The focus on technical knowledge to direct policy presented by behavioural insights has led to criticisms that the approach is expert led. The UK Behavioural Insights Team suggests that policy makers should “get the advice of experts and academics” (Behavioural Insights Team 2014, 50). In the same report ‘EAST: Four simple ways to apply behavioural insights’, the team provide a framework for policy makers to help spread understanding of behavioural approaches. The Behavioural Insights Team however cautions that the framework,

...won't turn you into the world's leading expert on behavioural insights. There are more complex frameworks and typologies, and many subtle and fascinating effects that EAST does not cover. (Behavioural Insights Team 2014, 3).

In this way the team is both advocating for and supporting the use of behavioural insights, and at the same time protecting their own expertise, framing it as separate from the skills of policy makers. In some ways this seems contradictory, as Behavioural Insights Teams are both prioritising randomised control trials, which come at the top of the evidence hierarchy, and expertise, which comes at the bottom. It may be that the Teams recognise the judgement and expertise needed in randomised control trials, and in policy making, but do not wish to present behavioural insights in this way. It also draws attention to the complex ways in which hierarchies of evidence are used in practice.

Nonetheless, in behavioural insights, the policy makers are framed as choice architects using the evidence to make policy decisions. It is the behavioural insights experts that are choosing the 'right' decision for people (John and Stoker 2019b). This expertise is framed as drawing on technical and scientific knowledge. As an illustrative example, the World Bank's nudge unit sought to raise awareness among teenage girls that older men were more likely to have HIV. They developed a nudge, testing information retention through a video game and through reading information. Such an approach was led by external experts and discounted local knowledge and therefore did not consider many of the structural and power imbalances that can lead teenage girls to have sex with older men in sub-Saharan Africa (McEwan 2018).

Given assertions that including local knowledge leads to a more democratic form of policy making, so too has the expert, technical-led nature of behavioural insights been accused of being undemocratic, or even post-democratic (Strassheim 2020). Experts decide what is the best decision for citizens, without the awareness or deliberation of these citizens (Lepenies and Małecka 2020). Alternative approaches or extensions of these approaches have been offered, to include other knowledges and make the use of nudge and behavioural insights more democratic. This might include that the values in behavioural science should be open to public debate (Lepenies and Malecka 2019) or that citizens need to approve certain types of nudges (Moseley and Stoker 2013). As noted in the previous chapter, academics have also promoted “nudge plus” (Richardson and John 2021) and “collaborative nudging” (Whitehead, Jones, and Pykett 2020). However, there remains limited empirical research on how policy makers interpret the use and inclusion of different types of knowledge, including local knowledge, in behavioural insights.

3.5.2 The political use of knowledge and evidence.

The instrumental application of knowledge to policy has been criticised for not representing the realities of policymaking. Here evidence-based policy is held up as an ideal, and policy-based evidence as a more realistic model of the research and policy interface (Strassheim and Kettunen 2014). Policy-based evidence is a dismissive term used to describe the selection of evidence to support or justify a policy decision. In this section I consider the political use of research.

In Weiss’ knowledge utilisation framework (1979), the political model occurs in areas where debate has become ideological and new research is unlikely to change an actor’s position. Research is instead used as evidence for their stance (Cairney 2019).

Such use may be opportunistic, such as when research conveniently supports a policy or argument, or more deeply ingrained behaviour (Head 2008). Head (2008) asserts that some policy areas will be more susceptible for the political use of evidence. For example, contradictory evidence may be ignored when political commitments have shaped the policy problem or solution, and research challenging the political position is unlikely to be commissioned or funded (Head 2008).

When using knowledge politically, actors may “trawl” for research by sifting through research and only keeping that which is useful for them; “farm” research through funding and publishing and repeating research that aligns with their interests, and/or “flak” evidence and “stain” people or organisations that oppose them (Stevens 2007). Such selective use of research to further an actors position has been categorised as highly rational, as it would be irrational for such actors not to try and further their own aims (Stevens 2007). Weiss (1979) also argues there is nothing improper about the political use of evidence, as long as the research is not falsely represented. When all parties have access to the research, and it is represented accurately, this is a legitimate and ‘worthy’ model of research utilisation (Weiss 1979). I note there the positivist assumptions underpinning the description of an ‘accurate interpretation’, and presumably therefore an inaccurate interpretation. Interpretivism brings into question the objective interpretation of evidence and what is meant by ‘accurate’, which Weiss also later questions (see Weiss 1991). Nonetheless, implicit in this political use of knowledge is that the evidence is framed as technical, as it is its very objective and uncontested nature that makes it an appealing political tool.

Other political uses have been described as tactical and symbolic. Weiss’ (1979) tactical model of research utilisation describes the use of knowledge for purposes that

relate little to the findings. For example, research may be used to deflect attention or delay action, or it may be used by actors to develop credentials and legitimacy. Here the research is used as a signal that action is been taken and an issue warrants attention. Using knowledge in decision making is also symbolic (Radaelli 1995). Claiming the use of knowledge for a policy decision symbolises the rational foundation of that decision. Producing and using knowledge also signifies that the person making a decision is rational and capable. It is a symbolic act to be producing and using knowledge, thus legitimating the decisions made (Radaelli 1995). Indeed, often an overabundance of evidence is produced (Stevens 2011) potentially to signal the strong foundation of evidence on which a decision is made. As such, the label of ‘evidence-based policy’ may be used as a strategic and political tool. It may be considered a “political slogan” rather than a description of how evidence is applied (Cairney 2019, 35). The label of ‘evidence-based’ is used to signal that a policy or political position is superior to others because it is evidence-based (Newman 2017). To then challenge a decision that has been labelled as ‘evidence-based’ forces an actor into a position where they are seemingly against using evidence to inform policy making.

Much of the criticism of the political use of knowledge seems to be addressed to policy makers, or as noted in the previous section, the users of knowledge. These criticisms may emanate from research producers’ frustration with the way ‘their’ evidence is being used, or mis-used, by other actors. However, it is not just policy makers who use evidence politically. In the context of how research can influence policy, Cairney (2019) argues effective actors employ framing and persuasion techniques to generate policy-maker attention to evidence on problems and the effectiveness of solutions. These strategies “exploit opportunities for evidence-informed policy change” (Cairney 2019, 22). These persuasive techniques are akin to selecting research for political

reasons to increase the influence of their research, and by extension, their authority. Weiss (1991) asserts that researcher producers can take data and package it as arguments, to advocate for research and evidence. She notes here the normative dilemma in potentially undermining the objective stance of technical knowledge, but goes on to suggest that this presents a more realistic version of policy making, that recognises research as one input into a political decision (Weiss 1991). Thus all policy actors can use knowledge politically, to advocate for their research and shape policy problems.

The political use of evidence is often seen as conflicting with the normative assumptions of evidence-based policy making and the instrumental application of knowledge. Criticisms are underpinned by a rationalist, linear ideal of policymaking, where politics gets in the way of how evidence is supposed to be used - objectively and impartially to solve problems. However, others have argued that evidence-based policy is inherently political, and the two cannot be separated. Strassheim (2017, 238) argues that “evidence in public policy is always inescapably related to the political”. Just as the label ‘evidence-based’ provides legitimacy, so too is it a “powerful metaphor in shaping what forms of knowledge are considered closest to the “truth” in decision-making processes and policy argument” (Marston and Watts 2003, 145). Knowledge, and knowledge gathering, may be used symbolically, but it is also a way of developing or exerting political power. Knowledge is a resource, and knowledge interpretation, use and dissemination an inherently political activity (Marston and Watts 2003). Boaz and Davies (2019) argue that research,

is a political act, with the capacity to disrupt assumptions, destabilise existing power relations and hierarchies, and bring to the fore marginalised

interests...As such, research data, information, knowledge, evidence – whatever the labels - are resources that interested parties can draw on as they advocate positions. (Boaz and Davies 2019, 193)

Evidence then is political because it is a way of controlling, managing and legitimating policy (Parsons 2002). Using knowledge to legitimise policy is political, as the policy is a way of maintaining or changing people's "resources, rights and obligations" (Nustad and Sending 2000, 53). Knowledge can be used to contest policy authority in situations where the boundaries of a policy are unstable or blur, such as with wicked problems (Daviter 2015). Daviter (2015) provides the example of policy authority shifting from social programs to public health programs when homelessness is linked to mental illness. His focus is on organisational epistemologies, but draws attention to the ways in which knowledge, and the political use of knowledge, and policy authority, influences policymaking.

3.5.2.1 Behavioural insights as a political use of knowledge

In this section I first consider the ways in which behavioural insights is depoliticised, before considering the limited research on the political use of knowledge in the approach. As noted in the previous section, behavioural insights seems to conform with a technical, rational perspective on policy making, ignoring the politics of evidence making and labelling (Feitsma and Whitehead 2019). Nudge is often framed a neutral policy tool, that is not political. For example, one recent paper argued "nudge methods as such do not affiliate to a definite political or value system. They are universal by nature" (Khadzhyradieva, Hrechko, and Smalskys 2019, 98). Nudges are often positioned by academics and government as a neutral policy tool which is an addition

to the toolkit of government (Grüne-Yanoff and Hertwig 2016; Tannenbaum, Fox, and Rogers 2017). Its construction as a value free tool seems consistent with the functionalist, instrumental approach described above. Research has found further support that nudge is interpreted as an instrument to achieve policy goals, rather than associated with a particular value set. For example, a study found senior policy makers' support for nudges was influenced by whether the nudge was directed towards achieving a liberal or conservative policy goal. In a study using a classic example of a nudge, defaults, Tannenbaum et al. (2017) found that liberal policy makers were more supportive of a nudge when used to achieve liberal policy goals, and conservative policy makers were more supportive of the use of nudge when used with conservative policy goals. Thus its "ideological flexibility" (Strassheim and Korinek 2016), allows it to be used by both sides of politics to pursue their own agendas.

The framing of nudge as a neutral tool may have several purposes. In his study on administrative change, Bezes (2007) found that constructing the technique or policy tool as neutral allows it to be used to rationalise policy and provide inarguable evidence for a policy approach. The technical nature of policy tools also makes an approach difficult to question, and therefore it becomes low-profile, escaping public attention reducing the potential for political conflicts (Bezes 2007). In behavioural insights, the construction of the approach as politically neutral, but also the emphasis on randomised control trials as technically complex, may also support the positioning of the approach as politically neutral.

Ball and Head (2021) argue that the emphasis on randomised control trials in behavioural insights has been used to depoliticise the policy process. Ball and Head (2021,116) conclude that a "reliance on RCT-based science overlooks the political

context of policymaking”. This does not seem to consider that the emphasis on these trials may very well be a product of the context. The authors go on to suggest that the scientific nature of randomised control trials is supposed to ‘depoliticise’ the evaluation of policy options; however, this masks the political nature of selecting research questions and instruments. However, given that actors in policy making are motivated and political, I suggest the study raises questions as to whether the very selection of randomised control trials, to depoliticise the process is a political act.

Although behavioural insights is framed as a neutral tool, scholars have argued that the knowledge it uses is value-laden. Behavioural insights, as a discipline, has selectively chosen research evidence that aligns with government’s philosophy of steering citizen behaviour while excluding evidence from other disciplines that could help inform policy, but does not adhere to this governance approach (Lepenies and Malecka 2019). Here evidence is used selectively, seemingly aligning with the political model of research utilisation, but it is done at the discipline level. The technical knowledge selected and framed as neutral by behavioural scientists is not value free. Before such knowledge enters policy, the theory underpinning much work of behavioural insights is value laden (Lepenies and Malecka 2019). Lepenies and Malecka (2020) have suggested that value judgements are made in selecting the hypothesis and theories used in behavioural science. Such value judgements could be linked to phronesis and normative judgements, however this is not explored theoretically or empirically in their paper. The authors also argue that criticisms of behavioural insights teams have forced such units to become advocates for behavioural insights, highlighting the need to ‘persuasively’ present their insights (Lepenies and Malecka 2020). At an organisational or network level, Strassheim (2021) analysed whether behavioural insights experts are better conceptualised as

epistemic communities, who advocate for the recognition of biases as a challenge for policy making, or as instrument constituencies, who are motivated in seeing behavioural insights as a tool or solution to policy problems. He argues there has been a shift from a consensus based approach to practice based approaches, emphasising the importance of randomised control trials. Such work has made important theoretical contributions in understanding the role of persuasion and the political use of knowledge in behavioural insights. However, their focus is on the units and organisations, rather than policy actors.

The role of policy actors using knowledge politically in behavioural insights has been largely neglected in academic research. Strassheim et al. (2015) have argued that behavioural insight organisations have developed politico-epistemic authority. This authority has been developed by actors who have framed themselves as sitting between science, society and the state, and by producing easily understood evidence founded on robust and persuasive experimental methods. Lepenies and Malecka (2020) have also suggested that behavioural insights actors may develop political and epistemic authority by producing knowledge through behavioural insight experimentation, then drawing on such knowledge as justification for sustaining the behavioural insights approach. Such hypothesis suggest behavioural insights actors are actors, using knowledge politically to grow their authority. However, there is limited empirical research with policy actors to support these assertions, and how such actors make sense of and interpret such actions is yet to be explored.

3.5.3 Conceptual use of knowledge

In this section I examine the use of knowledge that has been called influence (Boaz and Nutley 2019) or conceptual (Radaelli 1995). It does not reflect a direct application

of research for a specific reason, as in the instrumental or political use of knowledge. Rather, it is “a more diffuse and indirect form of utilisation” (Radaelli 1995, 161). This knowledge is subtle, indirect, and not easily recognisable, and occurs over time rather than in response to a specific issue.

Weiss (1986) argued that most evidence is not used directly to determine policy decisions or solve policy problems, but rather is reflected in the enlightenment model. The enlightenment model, as described by Janowitz (1969), suggests a more epistemological stance, where researchers shape and are shaped by research, and this research also contributes to the shaping of policy problems and goals. This model is contrasted with the engineering model, which is the linear, instrumental use of knowledge in policy making. In their study investigating the use of university research, Amara et al. (2004) found that the conceptual use of research is more prevalent in government administrative contexts than instrumental or symbolic uses of research. Here conceptual use was defined in the quantitative survey as shedding “light on situations and problems in my field of work” (Amara, Ouimet, and Landry 2004, 91). While this survey was narrowed to the use of university research, it reinforces Weiss (1986) assertions that the conceptual knowledge is dominant in shaping policy in government administrations.

In this model of research use, knowledge creeps into the policy makers understanding of the policy terrain. Here research, as a body of knowledge, comes to shape the way policy makers think about social issues and particular problems. It orientates the policy maker to the problem. It is unlikely to be a single study or even set of studies that change the way issues are thought about. These studies will often not be used instrumentally to address a particular problem for which it was designed. Instead over

time, research “helps turn what were non-problems into policy problems” (Weiss 1979, 430). Weiss herself criticises the enlightenment model as inefficient because of the time for research to permeate into policy makers’ awareness. Moreover, there is a danger of misrepresenting research, or headline grabbing research taking precedence. It may be “endarkenment” as much as enlightenment (Weiss 1979, 430).

Weiss’ (1979) ‘interactive approach’ in her meanings of research utilisation also been classified as a conceptual use of research. In the interactive model, social science research interacts with other forms of knowledge, as actors search and interact for knowledge. It is not a linear approach, but one of messy sense-making. This approach uses “experience, political insight, pressure, social technologies, and judgment” (Weiss 1979, 429) alongside empirical research. Actors may not always have all the information they require, nor is it conclusive, but they are required to make a decision nonetheless. Here policy makers seek to familiarise themselves with the multiple perspectives that may influence the issue. Multiple groups with a stake in the issue interact to move towards a consensus. In some ways, this model seems to reflect much of realities of policy making for which evidence-based policy making seems to ignore. This interactive model is categorised as conceptual, as technical knowledge is ‘diluted’ by other perspectives (Williams and Bryan 2007). However, Weiss interactive model has been criticised for assuming the superiority of technical knowledge, with actors seemingly have to contend with other knowledges (Elliott and Popay 2000).

Finally, Weiss also suggests that research is part of the intellectual enterprise of society. Policy influences research and research influences policy, with both being subject to the ideas of the time. Policy and research influence each other through funds for example, where government funding might attract interest in an area for

researchers, who then redefine and shape the issue, challenging policy perceptions. Head (2008) also notes that policy actors actively engage and shape research through funding, such as direct commissioning of research, or deciding the criteria for granting funding for social sciences research. In this way they also decide which methods or approaches are more or less legitimate in policy.

The conceptual approach has been criticised for not paying attention to which research influences policy, or the processes in which knowledge creeps into policy (Stevens 2007). Weiss (1986) suggests knowledge may influence policy actors as they are presented with different and sometimes conflicting evidence by advocacy groups and the media. In a sense-making process, they sort and seek to consider and order this material as it influences the way they see policy problems. Policy actors recognise the rivalry, cracks, tension and contradictions in this process, and indeed actively engage in and use these contradictions, as they present opposing parties with the conflicting evidence to 'test' the soundness, veracity, and authenticity of the evidence (Weiss 1986). However, this description of knowledge influence seems to suggest that all knowledge and evidence is able to equally influence policy and practice. This denies the authority and devaluing of some voices in shaping evidence.

3.5.3.1 Behavioural insights as a conceptual use of knowledge

There is limited research exploring the influence or conceptual use of knowledge in behavioural insights in public policy. This may be because of the relative novelty of the discipline, and conceptual models of knowledge predict change to happen slowly and over a long time. However, there is some theoretical literature on the influence of behavioural insights. For example, behavioural insights has been accused of overreach, with nudges and behavioural insights applied to areas as challenging as

obesity and family violence. This has led to suggestions that behavioural insights has encouraged public policy to be viewed through a behavioural lens (Lepenies, Mackay, and Quigley 2018). Other theoretical papers have also speculated as to the effect of behavioural insights on the problem orientation of policy actors. Feitsma and Whitehead (2019) suggest that the emphasis on psychology in behavioural insights may lead to policy actors focussing on individual behaviour in policy design ignoring more structural factors. However, both papers are speculative and empirical evidence with policy actors is required to understand policy actors' interpretations of behavioural insights in policy.

3.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter has demonstrated that behavioural insights seems to make technocratic and instrumental assumptions about knowledge utilisation. It seems to adhere to, if not parallel, the evidence-based policy paradigm. Both behavioural insights and evidence-based policy making focus on the importance of randomised control trials as a gold standard of knowledge and advocate for value free, technical knowledge to determine policy decisions. However, there are other ways in which knowledge may be used or have influence. Some academics have argued that behavioural insights may be used politically, but much of this research is theoretical and focusses on organisations. Moreover, the literature does not consider how actors in behavioural insights might use or interpret other types of knowledge in the approach, and how this knowledge might be used in shaping policy. This has led to my research questions, how do policy actors interpret and use knowledge in behavioural insights. In the next chapter I discuss my interpretive approach to exploring this research question. I outline my interpretive methodology, which focusses on the sense-making of policy actors and describe my qualitative methods, theorising and analytical approach.

4 CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I describe my methodology and methods that I took to explore my research question. I begin the chapter with my research questions before turning to my ontological and epistemological position. I consider policy problems to be socially constructed, and so an approach is required that focuses on the interpretations of actors as they act and interact. I use an interpretive approach that examines the interpretations and sense-making of policy actors. These interpretations emerged through qualitative interviews with policy actors in Australia, and I describe the methods I used to generate and then analyse the data. Throughout this chapter I draw attention to the iterative, sense-making process of interpretive research (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013). In my research I adhere to the concept of interpretive research as reflective and transparent to ensure trustworthiness in my thesis. While this chapter necessarily follows an orderly structure for clarity for the reader, my research did not, and I have included challenges of the research process throughout.

4.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The central research question of this thesis is how do policy actors interpret and use knowledge in behavioural insights. The complementary lines of inquiry are

- Which types of knowledge play a role in behavioural insights?
- Do policy actors use knowledge instrumentally, politically, or conceptually?

4.3 METHODOLOGY

4.3.1 Ontological and epistemological justification

An objectivist ontology regards reality as independent of social actors, contrasting to constructivism which sees reality as socially constructed, produced through social interaction. Typically, an objectivist ontology is linked to positivism, an epistemological position which focuses on measurable phenomena (typically quantitative), whereas interpretivist epistemologies emphasize the subjective meaning of social action and interaction and seeks to understand the many viewpoints of social actors (Grix 2002). In this research, I adopt a constructionist ontology and interpretive epistemology. Yanow (2006b, 6) has argued

Knowing which tool is best suited to the nail or the hole depends on the character of the subject of study, and so epistemological presuppositions themselves rest on the presupposed reality status of that subject. Ontological matters are, then, also a concern: whether the subject of study is considered objectively real in the world... or is considered as socially constructed.

Thus it is important to make clear both my ontological and epistemological stance and the reasons for this.

The focus of this research is behavioural insights in public policy. The design and development of policy, and the policy problems they seek to solve, are socially constructed. They are “human creations”, unlike objects which exist separately to human existence, for example a rock may exist without perception or interaction (Yanow 2006b, 9). Policy problems are not ‘given’ but are historically, geographically

and culturally situated. Problems are constructed through actions and interactions and through communication and sense-making. Thus, in this thesis I adopt a constructivist ontology which sees reality as socially constructed. A constructivist ontology requires an epistemology that seeks to understand the interpretations and sense-making of the policy actors constructing policy. Epistemologically, an interpretive position regards policy as rooted in, rather than existing independent of, the historical and cultural context. In interpretive research, people are social actors, actively constructing concepts (Yanow 2006). I note that interpretive research and qualitative research are not the same and qualitative research may be underpinned by positivist assumptions. While interpretive research is a paradigm or world view, qualitative methods are an approach to data generation (Yanow 2003b). In the table below, I provide an overview of my ontology, epistemology, methodology, method and data sources, drawing on definitions from Grix (2002).

Table 4-1

Position/activity	Definition	Approach
Ontology	Image of the social reality on which a theory is based	Constructionist
Epistemology	The way of knowing the social reality	Interpretivist
Methodology	Ways of acquiring knowledge	Interpretive policy analysis
Method	Procedures to acquire knowledge	Qualitative interviews
Data source	Data that can be generated	Interview transcripts

4.3.2 Interpretive policy analysis

To address my research question I use interpretive policy analysis (Yanow 2006). Interpretive approaches to policy analysis focus on meaning and the meanings of policy to actors (Yanow 2000). The scholarly literature proposes different approaches to interpretivism (Finlayson 2004), however the following is generally seen (Wagenaar 2014) as a useful definition,

Interpretive approaches to political studies focus on the meanings that shape actions and institutions, and the ways in which they do so (Bevir and Rhodes 2002, 131).

Interpretive approaches to public policy analysis argue that to understand behaviour and policy practice, analysts must understand the beliefs which have shaped those actions. That is, researchers are concerned with the way in which policy actors interpret their own actions by understanding the beliefs they hold (Hay 2011).

As discussed in the introduction, Colebatch (2014) has argued that interpretive approaches are fundamental to policy analysis. It is how policy makers interpret or make sense of policy that influences which policies receive attention and how policies are enacted. He argues,

that interpretation is not simply a tool that observers may use after the event to make sense of practice: it is an integral part of policy practice. (Colebatch 2014,355)

Interpretive policy analysis has grown from a niche approach to understanding policy to one that is now broadly accepted and found in many mainstream policy journals

(Wagenaar 2006). However, interpretive approaches still struggles in areas where the dominant paradigm in policy analysis is positivist (Sullivan 2016). Many of the descriptions of interpretivism seek to differentiate it from positivist approaches. For example, interpretive approaches do not seek to find the truth, they do not suppose there are objective facts 'out there' that need to be discovered, they do not quantify experiences. This distinguishing of interpretivism from positivism has led to interpretive policy analysis been described as a 'counter-identity' (Boswell and Corbett 2014a). Within this counter-identity sit different approaches to interpretive policy analysis (Yanow 2003b; Boswell and Corbett 2014b), which have been described as a 'family of approaches' (Wagenaar 2006). The strands of interpretive policy analysis include Dvora Yanow's interpretive policy analysis and Carol Bachhi's "What is the problem represented to be". Yanow's approach to interpretivism is representative of interpretive policy analysis (Wagenaar 2006). Yanow's approach argues it is important to understand what a policy 'means' to different actors. Those meanings may differ and there is no one way or 'truth' which interpretive approaches seek to uncover. In this approach it is important to understand both 'what' a policy means and 'how' it means, that is, what meanings are communicated and how they are interpreted (Yanow 2000).

Another interpretive approach espoused by Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes has been described as "philosophically sophisticated" (Wagenaar 2012, 86). Bevir and Rhodes (2002) argue that people act on their beliefs and preferences. People hold the beliefs they do because of their social context or 'traditions', which are webs of beliefs that shape actions. People employ their situated agency to negotiate 'dilemmas' which may lead them to change their beliefs (Rhodes and Bevir 2021). Situated agents are shaped but not constrained by their background, history, geography and context. They

are a 'product' of their context but are 'capable of independent action through their skills, experience and expertise' (Sullivan, Williams, and Jeffares 2012, 58).

In my thesis, I align with interpretive approaches which emphasise the importance of 'meaning' in the study of policy analysis. I adhere to an understanding of interpretive approaches as focussing on the "centrality of meaning in human life in all its aspects and a reflexivity on scientific practices related to meaning making and knowledge claims" (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). I align with Yanow's focus on meaning and flexibility as vital to my research (Yanow 2013), rather than following the method of her interpretive approach (Yanow 2000). In this way I take up the 'meaning' or central thrust of interpretive approaches. The strengths of interpretive policy analysis are that it emphasises meaning and actors and theory is developed from an empirically informed understanding of policy making. Interpretive policy analysis recognises the realities of policy making and the negotiations, framing, contested and promoted ideas that all contribute to policy processes (Sullivan 2016). Interpretive policy analysis in my research draws attention to the role of policy actors in behavioural insights. It is helpful in understanding how policy actors make sense of knowledges and which knowledges are seen as legitimate and persuasive. Interpretive research is appropriate for the study of knowledge, as knowledge is generated and facts established through actors' interpretations of the world (Hall 2014). These interpretations shape how knowledge and evidence is used in behavioural insights, whether this is instrumentally, politically, or conceptually.

While interpretive policy analysis is the most appropriate methodology for exploring my research questions, there are also limitations. One of the dominant criticisms of interpretive policy analysis is that it does not always pay attention to the role of

structure in policy making (Hay 2011). Here, structures do not explain behaviour, as it is actor's beliefs about those structures, what they mean and what they embody, that affects practices rather than the structures themselves (Hall 2014). That is, structures can be interpreted in different ways, and it is the interpretations of the policy actors that lead to behaviours, rather than the structures themselves. However, others (for example Turnbull 2011) have criticised this dismissal of structure arguing it should play a role in interpretivism and can do so without dominating analysis.

I note this criticism about structure, but suggest that the interpretive approach I adopt deliberately pays attention to the context in which policy actors operate (Yanow 2006a). As Hay (2011, 176) notes, structure and context are "synonyms" and I have noted the importance of the context in which behavioural insights emerges in my thesis so far. Throughout the thesis I draw attention to the context in which policy actors are sense-making, and below I also recognise the context and my own positionality in the research.

In this section I have discussed the different theories of interpretive approaches to policy analysis to draw attention to a commonalty, or thread between them. Theories of interpretivism consider meanings as a way to understand and explain action. There is an assumption of 'intentionality' that sits between and connects belief and action that I examine in these theories below. This conflicts with assumptions of behavioural insights that behaviours can occur as a result of the background to the choice and not because of beliefs. This is a source of tension between the methodological approach of the research and its subject.

For example, Brian Fay (1975) suggested that interpretive social science is founded on “action concepts”. Action concepts are a type of behaviour that reflects an intention, or is done “with a purpose” (Fay 1975, 78). Fay (1975) argues,

In describing actions, we are also making clear the intentions of the actor, which is to say that we are revealing the meaning that the act had for the actor. Importantly, the action needs to be placed in context, or in the practice. In explaining the action, the interpreter must pay attention to the practice.

Here he explicitly draws attention to intentionality, arguing that actions embody the intentions of an actor and the meaning of that act. He emphasises the importance of placing these behaviours in context but importantly, it is the intention behind the behaviour that requires attention. He compares the concept of jumping, which is intentional, to falling, which is not.

Hendrik Wagenaar has also written about intentionality when discussing the focus in interpretivism on intentionality rather than causal explanations. To understand meaning is to understand the intention of the behaviour or action. He describes actions as a “particular behaviour that is constituted by an intention” (Wagenaar 2006, 430). Behaviours are an expression, or a “window” of meaning (Wagenaar 2006). While Bevir and Rhodes do not often write about intentionality, it is implicit in much of their work when they describe the relationship between belief and behaviour. For example, Bevir and Rhodes (2002, 131) argue that people beliefs “shape actions”. That is, there is an intentionality as people choose to act in a particular way, with a particular aim, because of their beliefs. Beliefs “guide and inform actions (and the practices to which they give rise)” (Hay 2011, 172). Yanow has also argued “We act; we have intentions

about our actions; we interpret others' actions; we (attempt to) make sense of the world: We are meaning making creatures." (Yanow 2006b, 9).

These theories of interpretivism suggests there is there is an intentionality, or a purposefulness, in behaviour where the beliefs people hold lead to the actions people take even though the action cannot be separated from the context and shared meanings in which they occur. I do not contest the importance of intentionality or that behaviour is often shaped by our beliefs. However, behavioural insights and the academic principles underpinning the approach, suggests that people do not always behave in accordance with their beliefs. The context in which decisions are made can influence their actions. People's System 1, automatic thinking, operates reflexively without conscious thought (Tversky and Kahneman 1974). Therefore people may make a decision based on social cues or biases in thinking, without awareness that is the reason for making this choice. That is, actions may not always be shaped by beliefs, but are instead influenced by factors such as what choices others have made, or whether the choice is presented as a default option (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). The decisions they make may not be in their best interests, rather they are 'irrational' decisions. The principle that people may act without reflection is one of the foundational principles on which nudging was based and the cause of rigorous scholarly debate (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). This contradicts the intentionality between belief and action in interpretive approaches.

Further, academics such as Grüne-Yanoff and Hertwig in the behavioural economics field have argued that in some circumstances when an action is taken or choice is made, the person may not have a pre-existing belief or preference about that action. That is, while some economic theory predicts that people's choices *reveal* their

preferences, other theories suggest that preferences are *constructed* when making the choice (Grüne-Yanoff and Hertwig, 2016). Choices depend on “the problem (task and context), person (knowledge, ability, goals), and social context (accountability, group membership)” (Grüne-Yanoff and Hertwig 2016, 171). The actions which may be taken because of the decision making environment may then go on to create preferences over the long term (Ariely and Norton 2008). I discuss this concept of cognitive dissonance in my later empirical chapters.

Bevir and Rhodes (2016, 3) note that “People are not always aware of their actions. They are not always “conscious and rational”. However, they go on to say, “Nonetheless, almost all interpretive political scientists believe that political life consists of actions laden with meanings” (Bevir and Rhodes 2016, 3). I do not dispute that much action is laden with meaning. Rather I suggest this disruption to intentionality is a neglected aspect of interpretive approaches in policy analysis. My argument is that policy analysts should consider that intentions may not neatly lead to, or even be present in, the actions of policy actors.

We do not always act without purpose or thought, but at times we might. We might act because of the way a choice is presented to us. Then, we might make meaning when we reflect on that action or behaviour. We reconstruct our purpose or the intention of the behaviour drawing on our beliefs and why it ‘makes sense’ to us to have acted in this way. People may be irrational, but most people do not find comfort in acting in a way that does not align with their beliefs. This reinforces the importance of context in interpretive analysis, as it is the context and the environment of the policy actors that may be influencing actions.

I suggest that this challenge to intentionality also reinforces the importance of focussing on interpretive tensions. The tensions and contradictions in interviews may be the iterative sense-making of policy actors. The researcher is witness to the process of policy actors making sense of their behaviour, aligning their beliefs and actions. This process is not smooth and the contradictions and tensions that arise from this sense-making can be important points of insight to the researcher in analysis. For example, the tensions and contradictions in interviews as actors engage in this iterative sense-making may alert the researcher to the importance of context in a behaviour, or what beliefs are seen as legitimate and persuasive in making sense of a behaviour. Thus tensions and contradictions within actor's behaviours and beliefs, as well as between the field and literature, are important sources of insight. I develop this concept of interpretive tensions later in the thesis.

4.3.3 The importance of a flexible approach

Interpretive research approaches are inherently flexible as researchers cannot know before entering the field the tensions they will find and the actors they will uncover that are important to speak to. This is a strength of the research, rather than a caveat, as it permits the researcher to follow the paths as they unfold, leading to richer insights and understandings. As Yanow (2013) states,

Any single discovery might set the research trajectory off onto another path—to a different set of documents, a different archive, a different geographic location, a different research question (Yanow 2013, 99)

Flexibility allows the researcher to consider and respond to tensions and surprises uncovered in the field (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). Indeed, flexibility in research design

is vital, not just helpful (Maxwell, 2008). This flexibility was vital to my approach as I was unsure what I was going to find in the field when I first began my research in 2014 due to the scarcity of empirical research in nudge and the recent establishment of the behavioural insights teams. As such, the research design evolved throughout the PhD process. I briefly provide some examples of this evolution of my PhD to illustrate the flexibility, but also to support transparency in my research. In 2010, I was working as a public health researcher when I came across the theory of nudge. Here, I thought, was an approach which could help people become healthier but still ensured they were free to eat their favourite chocolate chip muffin. Yet, as I continued to read about nudge, I also discovered the negative commentary and criticism that nudge was manipulative and ineffective. I also began to look at how nudge was enacted in behavioural insights teams throughout the world. So my thesis began with a puzzle. Why, I wondered, were academics talking about nudge when government were talking about behavioural insights? Were these different or the same? However, as I began my fieldwork I was surprised participants often talked about behavioural insights as an evidence-based approach. Using the abductive approach I describe below, I considered and followed these surprises before concluding that the question of how knowledge is interpreted and used in behavioural insights was both a more interesting question and a more valuable contribution to the policy literature.

At this point I return to the tension in using interpretive approaches to study behavioural insights. Interpretive policy analysis seeks to understand actions through meanings. However, nudge and behavioural insights assumes that people are at times unaware of the reasons for their actions. This not only raises questions for the methodology of interpretive policy analysis, but also for my approach in exploring the research question with policy actors.

Policy actors are also subject to biases and heuristics (Gigerenzer 2015). In behavioural insights practices, policy actors may use knowledge because of social norms, or because it is the default knowledge available to them, or because it is salient information. Policy actors can be influenced in their decisions by the framing of choices and the status quo (Sheffer et al. 2018), as well as confirmation bias (Banuri, Dercon, and Gauri 2019). Indeed, one of the persistent criticisms of using nudges has been that policy actors may be influenced in the same way as policy targets. That is, there may not always be ‘intentionality’ between beliefs and behaviour for the policy actors in my interviews. There is a tension then in using interpretive approaches to reconstruct the meanings of actions to participants, when these actions may not have been guided by beliefs or even informed by their wider world-view. This presents a challenge to the assumption that to understand behavioural insights practice, I needed to explore policy actors’ interpretations and meaning making and how this shapes their use of knowledge. Nonetheless, I argue the methods chosen can still help understandings of the use of knowledge in behavioural insights.

Although not addressing behavioural insights specifically, it is useful to consider here the argument of Svend Brinkmann who draws on Judith Butler’s *Giving an account of oneself* (Brinkmann 2013). He argues we never have full insight into ourselves, as we cannot appreciate and know all that has created us. Thus, people may contradict themselves and be inconsistent. The interview process is therefore vital to explore these contradictory accounts and is a way of providing the participant with a chance to agree or disagree with the researcher’s interpretation of an account. The analysis of the research can then help unveil the underlying meanings and beliefs that may not be made explicit. Indeed, there may be multiple and contradictory meanings in the data, as an actor may interpret and explain phenomena throughout the interview

process. Actor's interpretations and beliefs may also change over time. Brinkmann (2013) argues that is important to focus on the tensions, contradictions and conflicts in the interview, rather than dismissing them and presenting a united or coherent narrative. The contradictions I heard in the interviews were some of the most fruitful area of analysis, leading me to insights in how policy actors interpreted and used knowledge in behavioural insights. That is, as the policy actors reconstructed the meanings of their actions they were also considering and interpreting the reasons for their actions. The contradictions and tensions in their conversation as they worked their way through these helped reveal the meanings of behavioural insights to policy actors. As others have noted, policy actors do not always tell the truth in these reconstructions (Finlayson et al. 2004) and further, if people act without reflection, then these reconstructions may be rationales or justifications of behaviour rather than the interpretations that led to the action. However, these justifications are still useful as they uncover actor's interpretations of what is legitimate or desirable in policy making.

As Brinkmann (2013) suggests, I focussed on these conflicts and tensions in the interviews. This led to an examination of how policy actors' actions are also shaped in contests over policy authority. For example, and as I go on to discuss in the empirical chapters, policy actors draw on evidence-based policy making rhetoric to support the use of behavioural insights. Yet in the interviews, I heard contradictions on the importance of local and technical knowledge as actors reconstructed the meanings of their actions. This approach to analysis aligns with my abductive approach to theorising where I focussed on tensions in the data.

4.3.4 Abductive theory development

In my research I used an abductive approach to theory development. Abductive theory development explores the tensions between what is expected (from literature reviews and theory) and what is generated in the field. The researcher goes between the literature and findings in an iterative fashion until theory is developed that can explain what is found (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013). Researchers may moderate or elaborate on existing theory or may develop new theory to understand the findings (Flick 2018b). Abductive theorising can be contrasted to deductive theory development, which defines the concepts and theory to be tested prior to fieldwork, or inductive theory which gathers all research and then develops theory. It also differs to other approaches, such as grounded theory, which assumes no knowledge when developing theory. Much like the flexible design that I discussed above, abductive approaches are suited to research that seeks to understand or explain an uncertain or unexpected situation (Brinkmann 2014). In my research, the abductive approach was useful as I was uncertain what I would observe in the field because of the limited research on actors in behavioural insights. Abductive approaches also allowed me to explore the tensions and surprises I heard in the interviews. This included for example, contradictions from policy actors both claiming randomised control trials were the most valuable evidence in informing policy, yet also arguing that local knowledge was more important. I also heard policy actors seeking to grow behavioural insights as an evidence-based approach to policy making, yet criticising other teams for using the approach. Policy actors spoke in the same interview about behavioural insights as only one tool that cannot solve all policy problems, but also that it can be used in all government policy. In my research the abductive approach was helpful as it helped me to focus in on and not dismiss these contradictions. Initially, I found these

inconsistencies uncomfortable. My background in applied research lent itself to smoothing over findings that did not 'fit' the pattern and a tendency to dismiss the contradictions as irrelevant. By using abductive theory development, I was able to explore these tensions and in doing so found myself with a more sophisticated analysis that did not seek to find one voice or story, but include and reflect the messy reality of policy making.

4.3.5 Reflexivity

Interpretive policy research requires reflexivity in the analysis (Yanow and Schwartz-Sea, 2006). The ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin my approach require an acknowledgment that I am framing the research from a particular perspective, and I interpret data through the context that I bring to the research (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). I deliberately use the first person throughout this thesis to visibly locate myself in the research. Throughout this chapter I also consider how my experiences shape my interpretations and analysis of data, which I now consider in more detail.

I have nearly 15 years' experience working in social sciences research for consultancies, not-for-profit organisations and universities. I have worked for and with multiple government clients on research studies and evaluations. I have also interviewed many government stakeholders for research projects. In many ways this has placed me at an advantage for this research, as I have some understanding of the administrative and political context in which the policy actors work. For example, the multiple pressures on the time of public servants ensured I kept the interviews to one hour. Further I acknowledge that the privileges I benefit from likely influenced my interactions and ability to access participants, including that I have the language and

discourse that can be used to communicate and encourage participation. Further, my work as a researcher, producing evidence and reports used to guide policy and projects, may have led me to reflect on the role of the evidence-based policy movement in behavioural insights and challenges with the use of quantitative and qualitative research.

My academic background in psychology and public health which led me to this research area initially led to positivist assumptions of the research questions and process, though at the beginning of my thesis I did not have the words then to describe this world view. Rather the bracketing of self was something that 'good researchers' did. The shedding of objectivity and assumptions I have embraced for this research, has also forced me to contend with assertions that research is a political act. Bacchi (2012) considers how research is an act of interference. She draws on examples to illustrate how labelling categories or asking opinions may create these categories and opinions. This has an effect, as people rethink and recast themselves to fit into the researcher's categories. The examples used by Bacchi (2012) were of categories in surveys, however such 'interference' may be exacerbated in my research. For example, when I talked to one participant about some of the ethical concerns raised about nudge, she commented that she had never heard any negative commentary on nudge and asked me to send her some papers about the issue. Another participant reflected that she has never before questioned the assumptions she had made on how government knows the right choices for the public. The act of participating in this research may bring new information, or having the time to reflect on their work may change policy actor's interpretations of the topic of nudge and behavioural insights.

4.4 METHODS: A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH

In this section I describe my qualitative research approach. Richards and Morse (2012) suggest a number of criteria for when qualitative methods are best suited to research (in Column A of Table 4-2 below). In Column B, I apply these criteria to my research to demonstrate why qualitative research is appropriate for this thesis.

Table 4-2

Criteria for qualitative research Column A	Application to my research Column B
To understand a little explored area	There is little research into the experience of policy actors who interpret and use knowledge in behavioural insights
Retain complexity and context	The context is important both for my methodology, but also as the context seems to shape the use of behavioural insights in different countries
Collect the meanings and experiences of the participant	It is the perspectives of policy actors, and how they interpret and use knowledge, that is the focus of my research
Construct, rather than test theory	This research is not testing a particular hypothesis but rather uses an abductive approach to theorising
Understand detail and themes	The detail will inform the patterns and theory of my findings.

Qualitative research is best suited to explore a little understood area (Richards and Morse 2012). This is relevant in my thesis, where little empirical research exists into the practice of behavioural insights and how policy actors interpret and use knowledge. Qualitative research is also suited for two related criteria, retaining complexity and context, and to understand detail and themes. Interpretivism emphasises the

importance of a situated approach and recognising and considering the context in which knowledge is interpreted and used. Complexity is retained in capturing and analysing the details of their experiences. These details will assist in identifying patterns in the data, as well as the contradictions and tensions when these details reveal an experience that does not 'fit' a pattern.

The criteria that qualitative research is suitable to access the meanings of participants also aligns with my interpretive approach, where it is the perspectives of policy actors and the "complexity of their interpretations" (Richards and Morse 2012, 28) that are a focus in my research. Finally, as noted above, in this research I am using an abductive approach to construct, rather than test theory, which is the final criteria outlined by Richards and Morse in assessing the suitability of research for qualitative approaches.

There is however an inherent challenge in using these criteria; if an area is not well understood, and the analyst is not testing a theory in this area, there is little guidance as to which details should be collected and be a focus of the research. It is here that I draw on the importance of a flexible approach to my research question as I needed to respond to the interests and interpretations of policy actors in the research interviews.

4.4.1 Using research interviews

Interpretive research uses one or more of the following – observation, interviewing and reading (Yanow 2006a). In this research I have used research interviews rather than observation or an ethnographic approach for both practical and theoretical design reasons.

Qualitative interviews with policy actors in government and academia provided me with the opportunity to hear multiple and contradictory interpretations of knowledge in

behavioural insights. I was also able to check on interpretations and the meaning of knowledges to policy actors in the interviews, and how this shaped their actions. Further, I found in the face to face format of an interview I was able to successfully build rapport with the policy actors who seemed to feel comfortable sharing their opinions of other teams and approaches and their use of behavioural insights.

I did not use observation or ethnography for several reasons. When my research began, only the NSW behavioural insights unit was operational. This team was located in another state of Australia from where I lived, and as I was working part time and also parent to a small child, it was not possible to spend substantial time away from home to undertake an ethnography in that department. I was also interested in the multiple interpretations of behavioural insights beyond that I would access in one team. I was aware of networks of public servants interested in and using nudges, although this was not their primary job function, and I was keen to also include their perspectives in the research. The decision not to use ethnography was also made because of uncertainty in the early stages of the research project as to what I would find. Although the use of nudges and behavioural insights in government was increasingly documented in government publications and communication, there was a scarcity of academic research on how nudges were constructed or where they were used. Thus I was unsure what I was looking for or what I would find. I may spend many hours observing in an ethnographic approach, but unable to answer or explore my research question. In the following section I describe the data generation process from the interviews.

4.4.2 The data generation process

4.4.2.1 Participants and recruitment

In this research, I used a purposive sampling method which deliberately selects the individuals of interest (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Purposive sampling can be useful for researchers with greater experience (Flick 2018a) and as noted above, prior to commencing my PhD I had over a decade of research experience, including in designing qualitative research projects and conducting fieldwork. Purposive sampling is also associated with flexible research designs. The purposive sampling approach I used entailed consideration of the people who, based on my understanding and experience, could meaningfully contribute to the research (Morse 1995). This included policy actors that work within government and actors who were external to the public service. In Australia, consultancies and universities have also become specialised in providing services on nudge design and implementation. This informed my research design, and the selection of participants. I invited participants based on the following criteria;

1. They had experience working in the public service.

This was because my research focuses on the use of nudges and behavioural insights in government specifically. Therefore, one of the selection criteria was that the participants had worked, or had recently worked, in the public service. I interviewed public servants who worked at both the state and federal level, across agencies and departments. I did not interview policy actors working in local government, primarily because I was unaware of any behavioural insights projects developed in local councils.

2. Or they worked outside the public service, but consulted to or were engaged with government.

Behavioural insights projects are also developed by academics or consultants engaged by the public service, aligning with the idea of policy work (Colebatch, Hoppe, and Noordegraaf 2010). Colebatch et al. (2010) argue that policy workers, which includes employees of NGOs, think tanks and industry bodies, also develop policy. These policy workers bring their knowledge to policy and may also be directly involved in their design or implementation. In my research these actors may influence the interpretations and also shape the use of knowledge in behavioural insights. Therefore, I also interviewed consultants who worked with government on behavioural insights projects or who worked closely enough with government they were able to comment on the use of nudges in government. Ultimately all of the actors I spoke to were, what I have termed, academic consultants. They worked for universities, but part of their role was working with or advising government on behavioural insights. This work included sharing advice on behavioural insights and how it can be used, or been funded by government to develop or run behavioural insights projects, including randomised control trials.

3. They also had experience with nudges or behavioural insights

All the policy actors I spoke to had some experience or involvement in behavioural insights. This included working directly with the design and development of projects, they had undertaken training or education in the area or they had sufficient familiarity with the approach that they could meaningfully participate in a research interview.

I acknowledge here that I was interviewing those at the centre of the use of behavioural insights, and this is a potential limitation with the research. The majority of participants were likely to support or be favourable towards the use of behavioural insights, given that they were involved in their delivery. In this research I was also keen to understand the perspective and interpretations of politicians who may be supporting the approach, although as described above my main focus was those enacting behavioural insights. However, I was unable to access any who were interested or willing to be interviewed and as such this thesis does not include this perspective.

In this section I describe how I accessed participants in the interviews. From the time I developed my PhD proposal I began developing networks to source potential participants. I joined networks of interested practitioners and attended seminars to immerse myself in the language of policy and the conversations that were occurring about behavioural insights. This reflects the concept of embedded research which is part of interpretive research (Hay 2011). This was also an important step in ensuring that the proposed project was feasible. This scoping out of the research projects was discussed with the university ethics department and was deemed to be a typical and expected part of recruiting for research projects.

To access participants, I also sought connections from colleagues who knew people in the public service working in behavioural insights. I sent emails to people I had researched on the internet that worked in government to inform them of my research and invite them to participate. The multiple channels I used to source participants reduced the potential that I was 'enmeshed' in a network and only hearing similar voices (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2013, 87). The tensions I examine in my empirical chapters across participants also provided additional reassurance that I was not

hearing only one voice on behavioural insights. I also used a snowball sampling approach to recruit other participants (Noy 2008). At the end of each interview I asked the participant whether they knew of anyone else that might be interested and willing to take part in the research. They then sent an email connecting me with the potential participant.

My standard research approach was to email the potential participant whose name and details had been obtained. I then arranged to meet them to discuss my research. This helped build trust for the research, and also ensured they were clear on its purpose and outcomes of the research and what their involvement would entail. This approach also allowed them to feel comfortable asking questions about the research, as it was an informal chat, and positioned as such. At the beginning of the chat I outlined the ethics statements and requirements and that I would require signed consent prior to using any information or data from the conversation. I did not set up an introductory conversation for all participants, and for some outside of government or who had been referred from other participants I directly scheduled a time. These participants were still invited to ask questions and express any concerns they may have had prior to the interview commencing. Any questions expressed were usually about anonymity. No aspect of these introductory conversations were used in the research. Where relevant the aforementioned conversation was used to guide the interview and ensure it was as productive as possible. I was aware I would be using the participants valuable time and wanted to ensure we kept the interviews to an hour. For me, this was an important aspect of respecting the participants of the research project.

My fieldwork took place between November 2016 and October 2017. I spoke to a total of 30 people across 14 organisations. I had expected in speaking to multiple people in the same organisations I would find alignments in their perspectives and interpretations of knowledge in behavioural insights. However, most often they did not speak with one voice, but instead reflected their own interpretations and experiences they brought to behavioural insights. In the analysis chapters, I draw attention to where policy actors come from the same team where relevant or where this helps to explain patterns in the data. I also note in the empirical chapters where there may be differences between the interpretations of those internal or external to the public service. In Table 4-3 below I provide more detail about whether the participants were internal or external to government, and whether they were at the state or federal level. However, this is for the information of the reader and for context for the empirical chapters. In line with my interpretive approach, I am not seeking to demonstrate the representativeness of the sample, nor suggest that the results are in any way generalizable. In my empirical chapters I describe participants as public servants or academic consultants.

Table 4-3

Academic consultants	8
Public servants – State Government	17
Public servants – Federal Government	5

4.4.3 Ethics and consent

Consent was obtained through the Plain Language Statement and consent form which all participants signed. I also began each interview by asking if they had any questions

about the research or its purpose. The research assured the participants confidentiality and anonymity. As such, all participants have been described as policy actors, with those working in government as public servants, or as academic consultants. Participants were invited to freely discuss any projects or policies they were involved with and these details were then obscured or concealed as necessary to ensure anonymity. In order to ensure anonymity, I have not specified the department, regulator, agency, consultancy or universities represented by participants. Consent was obtained from the participants to record the interview. Interviews were recorded using the app 'audio memo' on my phone. The file was then uploaded to a secure cloud location, which was password protected. The files were also not saved using the names of the participants. The interviews were then transcribed using an online transcription service. The online service had strict information storage processes and any files received online were encrypted using the highest possible level of security. Anyone transcribing the file had also signed strict confidentiality agreements. As an added level of security, I also requested that following the analysis phase all files were deleted from their system.

This research was reviewed by the University ethics department and deemed to be low risk. Nonetheless, it is important to briefly detail the potential ethical implications for the research participants. The ethical considerations for the participants included that they were participating in a research project on a topic that has generated some controversy in academic literature, government reports, and media commentary. These controversies pertain to the manipulation of citizens, and that it is unethical to nudge. If the topic of ethics or controversies around nudge arose I responded to participants by continuing the conversation if they were openly talking about the issues, or returning to other questions if they provided closed or non-detailed

responses. I have also ensured that confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by removing or obscuring recognisable details in the empirical chapters.

There are other ethical considerations inherent in the methodology chosen. Brinkmann (Brinkmann 2018, 588) discusses five problems with the ethics of qualitative research which I have listed below.

1. The 'asymmetrical power relation of the interview', as the researcher sets the agenda, participants and scope
2. The one-directional nature of the dialogue, as it is the researcher asking the questions
3. The interview is a means to the researcher's goals
4. The interview may be manipulated to reach the researcher's goals, and
5. It is only the researcher that interprets the interviewee's statements.

I could not eliminate these power asymmetries, but feel it is important to address them. As the researcher, I did set the purpose and scope of the interview, and the interview did serve the purpose of helping me achieve my research aims. However, all the interviewees had the potential to decline to participate if they wished. I also always included time at the end of the interview to discuss any other areas that the participant felt was important. I note that this section was often when participants offered rich detail of areas that were interesting to them, but were also very useful in generating data and revealing new and interesting considerations that helped guide my research. I did also ask the participant questions, as my method used interviews, however I was guided by the participant and their areas of interest. Further, throughout the interview I interpreted the participant's interpretations and fed this back to participants in a sense-

making process. I provide further detail on the research interview process in the following section.

4.4.4 Research interviews

Research interviews may be relatively structured, such as when using surveys and questionnaires, or semi-structured, where the interviewer may focus and guide the conversation, but the conversation is also based on interest and experience of the participant. There are also relatively unstructured interviews, such as the life story interview, where it is difficult to prepare questions and the interviewer responds as the narrative unfolds (Brinkmann 2018). My research interviews were semi-structured, as although I had questions and guided the conversations, it was also directed by the participants and their responses. This is consistent with an interpretive approach where the researcher views the interview as a directed conversation (Yanow 2006a). In these conversations, the interviewer is responsive to the participant and seeks to understand their perspectives or ideas. Qualitative research is a knowledge production practice (Brinkmann 2016) and knowledge is generated from the action and interaction of me and the policy actor. I use the term data generation to acknowledge that data is not 'out there' waiting to be collected, but is produced in these interactions. I use the term policy actor or participant to reflect this active involvement of both myself and the participant in the interview process.

Most interviews were an hour in length and were undertaken face to face. They were either located in the participant's workplace, at my place of work, or occasionally at a café. One interview was undertaken by phone when a face to face meeting could not be organised.

An initial discussion guide was developed prior to fieldwork. This included areas of discussion rather than ask specific questions. These areas of discussion were

- Their job role and experience
- Their experience developing policy
- Their experience developing nudge policies
- What made them decide to use nudges
- Why they think the approach has become popular
- When should nudge be used, and when should it not be used

Typically, I began each conversation by asking the participants to tell me about themselves and their work background and how they came to be interested in behavioural insights. This approach allows participants to feel comfortable with the interview, as they are the 'experts' on this particular topic (Spradley 1979). In this way rapport is built between myself and the policy actor. In the interview guide above I have included general discussion areas such as why has nudge become popular. However, during the interviews wherever possible I asked follow up questions to generate these details and complexity noted above. For example, I might reference a previous project or policy mentioned by the participant and ask, "and what about X policy, can you talk me through the process on selecting this approach?" or "can you provide me with an example of that"?

The discussion guide developed throughout my fieldwork period. My abductive flexible approach led me to reflect after each interview on the tensions between what I heard and what I was expecting to hear from the literature and other interviews. This ongoing analysis led to a change of research focus. For example, during the interviews,

participants often referred to the evidence base of nudge and behavioural insights without prompting. In some interviews, the participant would, seemingly contradictorily, both advocate for and argue against the use of randomised control trials. Thus my research, and the discussion guide, moved from the distinctiveness and popularity of nudge to knowledge use. Further, I understood that 'nudge' as a concept which I focussed on in my original research guide above was less relevant than behavioural insights, which became the focus of my research. That is, nudge was interpreted as one small aspect of a behavioural insights approach.

Feedback I received from those interviews was ethically important to me as a researcher. Participants often mentioned that they found the interview useful as it gave them time to pause and reflect on their work, which was something they often do not have the time to do. Further, the willingness of the participants to pass on others details reassured me that the interview was not seen as unduly difficult or distressing.

4.5 APPROACH TO DATA ANALYSIS

4.5.1 Trustworthiness in my data analysis

Qualitative interpretive research is often, inappropriately, held to the same standards as quantitative research (Denzin 2009; Yanow 2003a). This includes standards such as validity and generalisability. In qualitative research, data is not 'generalisable' in the quantitative sense. The interpretations of a comparatively small number of participants may not be representative of the experiences of all of those working in government. Instead triangulation is sometimes used to assert credibility in qualitative research (Maxwell 2008). Triangulation involves looking at multiple sources, or seeking multiple perspectives in order to corroborate findings or reveal inconsistencies (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). Indeed, some interpretivist approaches advocate for

triangulation in interviews (Hay 2011). Bevir and Rhodes (2005, 184) argue that narratives are a form of explanation and they should be “accurate, comprehensive, and consistent”. This consistency requires narratives that fit “many facts with few outstanding exceptions” (Bevir and Rhodes 2005, 184).

In my research I did not use multiple sources, such as policy documents or observations as well as interviews. My aim was not to corroborate stories or check for consistency in messages (Fraser and Davis 2019). Contradictions and discrepancies across and within interviews enriched my analysis rather than undermined it. Rather than using triangulation to ‘explain’ inconsistencies, it was these puzzles which were the source of much insight.

In this research I aim for trustworthiness in the data. Trustworthiness is where “efforts are self-consciously deliberate, transparent, and ethical” (Yanow 2013). Yanow (2013, 102) has also discussed the idea of rigour, which she argues are the logical construction of arguments,

where conclusions are adequately supported by the evidence that is presented, such that the reader is persuaded of the cogency of the argument.

This is supported through the justification of the sampling approaches and selection of participants, including consideration of silenced voices in this process. In this chapter I have transparently described my methods, and discuss in my limitations which voices have not been included in my research. I have also openly reflected on the ways in which my experiences have shaped my approach. Trustworthiness in my

data is also supported by the practices I took to reflect on my interpretations with policy actors. In the interviews I checked and summarised my understandings with participants. I also provided a report on one project that gave me confidence in my analysis. During my fieldwork I was asked by one participant to provide a brief outline on the experiences of those working on a behavioural insights project. I felt this was important in addressing the power imbalances mentioned above, and that my research should be helpful to practitioners as well as contribute to academic theory. I interviewed policy actors involved in the project, ensuring complete transparency that some of their responses would be used in this internal report, and others for my project. We were able to navigate the interviews and on occasion a participant would ask me to not to represent a view to their internal partners. The report was anonymised, to the extent it was possible, and then provided back to the participants before been provided to the original requestor. The report was a two-page document describing the behavioural insights project, summarising participants' perceptions on what had gone well on the project and what could be improved. The report offered those involved a chance to provide feedback on my insights, and I was able to gain confidence in my interpretations. The informal comments received from the head of the department was that the report was more useful than a large scale evaluation that had just been undertaken. Again, this gave me the confidence that I was usefully and appropriately representing the interpretations of the policy actors. This thesis provides analysis beyond that of representing the interpretations of policy actors, and in the next section I describe this sense-making and analysis.

4.5.2 Making sense of the data

In this section I explain my approach to analysing the data. In the interests of trustworthiness, I transparently describe the challenges I faced in my research. Throughout the fieldwork I was engaged in data analysis. After each interview, I reflected on the participant's ideas and perceptions and whether these seemed to fit with the other interviews and the literature. At times I made broad notes in and following these interviews, and this ongoing analysis then fed into my fieldwork notes. Thus, in line with my interpretive approach, my data analysis and generation were iterative and ongoing throughout the fieldwork (Yanow 2003a), although I have separated my data generation and data analysis into sections in the interests of clarity for the reader. At the end of my fieldwork, as others have found, I believed I had a good understanding of the findings. However, my story developed and the findings of my research changed after the fieldwork and through my analysis (Soss 2006, 137).

My first approach to analysis was to code the data from the interview transcripts. On reflection, this step was likely influenced by my positivist assumptions about research and the need to demonstrate a systematic and widely accepted approach to data analysis. Thus I succumbed to the assumption that seems to be prevalent (Brinkmann 2014) that coding is required for qualitative data. I originally coded the data in the software Nvivo, developing a codeframe from the literature and the fieldwork. However, this 'mechanical' method of analysis (Brinkmann 2014) left my research and analysis too thin.

I therefore returned to the academic literature on both interpretive methodologies and methods and reread interpretive research work including others experiences of undertaking interpretive analysis. I felt, as others have, that I was drowning in data

(Hendriks 2007) and that my analysis was more akin to a series of 'aha!' moments than a methodical plodding (Yanow 2013). This gave me the confidence that my experience in doing interpretive research was not unusual. I discovered that the instinctive approach I had been using, of going between findings and the literature and seeking out tensions, was an abductive approach that I have described above. In my analysis I was looking for patterns in ideas or framings of activity but also where these patterns were disrupted. Rather than dismiss contradictions as not part of the story, or as 'outliers', I was reflecting on and picking at them in an iterative sense-making process. Understanding that I was using an abductive approach provided me with the confidence to organise and systematise my approach to data analysis.

I then went back to the data and began the analytical approach again. I now felt I had literature and theory to describe the analysis I was undertaking. In my analysis, I deliberately and systematically worked through each interview. I developed an analysis template which began with my sense of the interview and the tensions or puzzles that I saw. I then went through the different stages outlined below. In the first stage I read through each transcript to get a sense of the interview, making observations on any contradictions in the interview, or anything that surprised me or contradicted expectations. In the second stage I read the transcript again in more careful detail, with my research questions in mind. I made notes on each interview in a separate analysis document. For each interview I analysed the policy actor's interpretation of knowledge, and which knowledges they considered and used and the interplay between them. I compared my analysis and findings to what was in the literature, where patterns aligned and where there were contradictions. I looked for silences in the data – what was I expecting from my analysis of the literature to find in the interviews that was not there? Throughout my analysis, I also reflected on my own

biases and interpretation of the transcripts. I completed this analysis for all thirty interviews. I then compared the interviews, finding patterns and searching for tensions across these interviews as well as within the interviews. However, I note I was also undertaking this analysis in the previous stages, where I considered how each interview sat with the others I had analysed. I then more systematically compared the analysis to the academic literature, examining whether literature explained my findings, or whether my findings contradicted or built on academic theory and empirical findings. Finally, I drew the literature and findings together to form my empirical chapters. This process is outlined in Table 4-4 below.

Table 4-4

Stage One
• Read each interview transcript from beginning to end
• Makes notes as I go through. What is striking, what surprises me, what is contradictory?
Stage Two
• Reread the transcript
• Consider research questions
• Pay particular attention to the use of knowledge, and evidence (and the interplay between them)

- Guiding questions might be - How do they conceive of evidence? How is knowledge considered and used? What role is it seen to play? How does this sit with the literature on knowledge, knowledge utilisation and evidence-based policy? - What is the meaning of nudge to them? What do they believe themselves to be doing? And how is this legitimised, defined, bounded compared to others? - Is meaning linked to action? Where is the agency that I think is there? - What is hidden? What is not said? Why are they making certain comments, but not others? What reflects the literature, and what does not? - Make note of new questions and ideas that arise as I analyse transcripts - Consider my own perspectives and biases as I analyse. Why might I be placing importance on 'this' but not 'that'?
Stage Three
Consider the patterns I am finding across the interviews
Ask what is the same, what is different? Why might this be?
Drawings and sketches to visualise how the different components fit together
Stage Four
Locate and relocate in the literature. Do I need to find new literature to theorise/explain?
What shape is this taking? What is my argument, narrative, research question? What does this mean for my analysis chapters?
Stage Five
Draw together analysis to form narrative/chapters.

Although this process involved extensive note taking and analysis drafting, writing facilitated the analytic process. In this way, I also found “writing is, itself, a method—a method of analysis and of discovery” (Yanow 2006b, 20).

Moisander and Valtonen (2006) have argued that analysing through writing forces the researcher to articulate and define ideas and give form to unformed ideas, as through

the writing these ideas must be developed or reconsidered (Moisander and Valtonen 2006). It was in this extensive writing phase that I was able to consider and reflect on the puzzles and silences in the data. In my research, writing was particularly useful with the abductive approach that I took. Throughout the writing of the empirical chapters I returned to both the transcripts and to the literature, reading and rereading to examine the patterns and contradictions between the interviews and literature. The writing helped reveal the tensions and contradictions in the research that did not seem to fit with the emerging story. Through this process the framework for my three empirical chapters emerged. I concluded that the three categories of knowledge use in policy, instrumental, political, and conceptual, would be a useful way to structure the chapters for the reader. I now turn to my conclusions before introducing my three analytical chapters.

4.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have described my methodology and methods. I have shown that an interpretive approach was useful to explore my research questions as it focusses on the meanings and interpretations of policy actors and how these shape action. I considered my abductive approach where I traverse between the literature and my data, exploring the tensions and unexpected findings. I also described my qualitative interviews and data analysis.

My methodologies underpin the following empirical chapters. Aligning with my abductive approach of going between the data and literature, these chapters both analyse the data and discuss where academic research supports my findings and where it contradicts. I also deliberately and explicitly describe tensions and contradictions in these chapters. I consider how the interpretation of the knowledge in

behavioural insights shapes the actions and activities of the policy actors, but also where this is challenged. In my first empirical chapter I explore the instrumental use of knowledge. In the second empirical chapter I build on this examination arguing that the instrumental interpretation of knowledge is intertwined with actors' political use of knowledge, and in the third chapter I explore how this then influences understandings of policy in the conceptual use of knowledge in behavioural insights. Although in theory and practice these categories overlap (Weiss 1979), I have structured the chapters in this way as it broadly reflects the scholarly literature and is a useful heuristic in exploring the different uses of knowledge. I explore the boundaries of these categories of knowledge use, and question their disconnectedness, in the final chapter.

5 CHAPTER 5: THE INSTRUMENTAL USE OF KNOWLEDGE IN BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This is the first of three empirical chapters in this thesis. In this first chapter, I examine policy actors' interpretations of behavioural insights as an instrumental application of knowledge. The instrumental application of knowledge is described as a linear approach to policy making where knowledge and evidence is used to solve policy problems. This linear use seeks to base policy processes on evidence, privileging technical knowledge and often ignoring the values and politics inherent in policy making (Newman 2017). In this chapter I argue policy actors interpret behavioural insights as an evidence-based approach as it draws on and produces academic and scientific knowledge which is used to solve policy problems, aligning with Weiss' (1979) model of research utilisation. I conceptualise these strands of drawing on and

producing knowledge as behavioural insights as *theory* and behavioural insights as *method*. Firstly, behavioural insights as *theory*, as it draws on academic and scientific knowledges about biases and behaviour. Secondly, behavioural insights as *method*, as it produces knowledge through scientific methods such as randomised control trials. I map these onto the behavioural insights processes. Moreover, behavioural insights privileges technical knowledge, and I identify a critical tension as policy actors struggle to fit local knowledge into these behavioural insights processes.

5.2 BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS AND EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY

Evidence-based policy making is described as the concept that “rigorous research”, “good data” and “reliable information” should inform public policy (Head 2010a, 13). In this section I explore the ways in which policy actors interpret behavioural insights as an evidence-based approach which applies knowledge instrumentally to solve policy problems. I first identified this association between behavioural insights and evidence-based policy making when policy actors were talking about their work background. I often asked policy actors about their background as a way of opening the interviews and building rapport with the participants. In one of my first conversations, when I asked a public servant about her background, her response was “I came to behavioural insights essentially through an interest that policies the government implement be more evidence-based” (PS2). Other policy actors also explained that their interest in behavioural insights came from a desire to work in policy built on research and evidence. One public servant I spoke to had recently moved to a dedicated behavioural insights team. She had been working in government research but had grown frustrated working on projects that were not used or she felt did not have any impact. This public servant said,

And then I just kept hearing a bit about the behavioural insights team... a role came up within that team and it's definitely for me the best mixture of research and policy and, actually practical implications that I've found so far. (PS18)

This comment reflects how the public servant perceives behavioural insights as an approach that uses research and evidence in policy. The policy actor also spoke of the 'practical implications' of behavioural insights research and this reflects a pattern in the interviews where behavioural insights is associated with "specific actions taken on the basis of knowledge" (Radaelli 1995, 161). Policy actors interpreted behavioural insights as an evidence-based approach that is able to provide direction on policy making. This direction or action is reflected in the comments of another public servant who had recently attended a training day on behavioural insights. She said "I think anything which helps policy makers expand their understanding of issues and how they can effectively intervene in an issue is really useful" (PS3). The way she speaks about behavioural insights espouses a rational, linear version of policy making where research is used to better understand and solve policy problems. Behavioural insights reflects an instrumental approach to policy making (Weiss 1979) where evidence from behavioural insights is directly applied to policy. Here, behavioural insights aligns to an *idealised* representation of policy making, where policy is based on the facts and information pertaining to a particular policy problem (Cairney 2019).

Policy actors used evidence-based policy discourse when talking about behavioural insights in the interviews. They explained that behavioural insights was a way of finding out 'what works'. For example, one public servant explained that their behavioural insights projects are all about "testing what works" (PS20). 'What works'

has been associated with evidence-based policy, through academic papers and books (Boaz and Davies 2019) and the networks of What Works centres in the UK that have been established to support the use of evidence-based policy making (Fleming and Rhodes 2018). Other actors explicitly linked behavioural insights with evidence-based policy. In the excerpt below an academic consultant was discussing the popularity of behavioural insights in government saying,

One of the great strengths of the units, I think, really, for policy, is basing it all on evidence-based policy. So really bringing evidence-based policy into the centre of government... There's a wide range of tools and nudge is one tool. But I think the way the nudging has been positioned in the government and they create some really good results including the things that governments like, like revenue collection, evidence-based policy has been demonstrated and I think that's incredibly useful... It's practitioners, from what I understand, have been given the power that failure is acceptable, which I understand in government most of the times it's not so failure is either not evaluated or wanted to be swept under the carpet... I think is it bringing that scientific method into the heart of the government and getting the results from it. (AC8)

The description of nudge as a 'tool' implies behavioural insights was something that could be selected from the policy toolkit and applied as needed depending on the policy problem. The concept that nudge "has been positioned" implies a marketing of nudge that I examine in the second chapter. The academic consultant also argues that the importance of nudge is not the approach itself, but how it has led to an interest in evidence-based policy. Nudge is talked about as an evidence-based approach, with

evidence conceived as testing and experimentation and the importance of legitimising the scientific method of trials in government. This reflects academic interpretations of behavioural insights as an evidence-based approach to policy making with an emphasis on testing (Troussard and van Bavel 2018; Kuehnhanss 2018; Ball 2021).

This interpretation of behavioural insights as evidence that is concerned specifically with trials and science was reflected by policy actors throughout the interviews. For example, another public servant I spoke to suggested that evidence-based policy making was the most important aspect of nudge. He said,

Seizing the interest in nudge by senior executives and decisions makers is actually more fundamentally important than behavioural insights, because there's probably a lack of respect in government for evidence-based policy.... getting respect for the idea that we're going to do this in two different ways in two different places or getting respect for the way that we're going to have a crack, find out what happened and didn't work or did work before we do it, is actually more deeply important than nudging is, because you're actually building in the understanding of evidence-based policy and programme delivery. (PS5)

The policy actor explains nudge is raising awareness of evidence-based policy making, but refers to trialling approaches to see 'what works' before rolling out an intervention. This reflects the association, if not conflation, of behavioural insights with evidence-based policy making. For this public servant, nudge as scientific knowledge and its link to trialling and testing, is the vehicle to embed evidence-based policy. He

went on to say that nudge will only have marginal effects in public policy, although these effects can translate to quite large amounts of revenue and compliance. Rather it is evidence-based policy making that can help with larger societal issues through understanding whether social programmes are working. When talking about the impact of nudge on social issues, the public servant told the story of the scared straight campaign as evidence that programmes should be evaluated. The scared straight programme took juvenile offenders to gaol for one week to meet criminals, to 'scare them' into not offending again. When finally evaluated using a randomised control trial, the program found higher rates of offending among those who had attended the scared straight programme than those who had not. The public servant used this vignette as support for the importance of trialling and testing programmes. He also spoke of evidence-based policy as something that government *should* be doing. He spoke about how 'good' public servants ask "What's the problem, what's the evidence for the problem, and what does the evidence tell us, and how do I dissect it to work out what the best intervention is?" (PS5). He contrasts this evidence-based approach to other public servants who will simply "deduce" this answer. He closely entwined technical knowledge, which is scientific, universal and abstracted (Yanow 2004) with normative knowledge of how evidence should be used. He went on to say,

I think if someone's driven by the kind of public sector value concept of what's good public value and justifying it and being able to explain what works...consequently, they'll be looking for something like it [nudge]. (PS5)

Here the public servant talks about evidence-based policy making as closely entwined with public sector value. I return further to this theme in the second chapter where I

examine these normative arguments, as they are a way of advocating for, sustaining and growing behavioural insights. In this next section however I further examine this interpretation of behavioural insights as an evidence-based approach.

5.3 KNOWLEDGE AS INFORMING AND PRODUCING

In this section I consider the patterns that emerged when policy actors talked about behavioural insights as evidence-based. In the interviews I heard two understandings of knowledge in behavioural insights. The first was about the academic theory and principles underpinning behavioural insights, such as irrationality, framing, and salience. These principles were analysed in the book *Nudge* (Thaler and Sunstein 2008) and include the theory of System 1 and System 2 thinking and heuristics and biases (Tversky and Kahneman 1974). I have conceptualised this as behavioural insight as *theory*. Behavioural insights is also seen as a *method* through its use of trials and experimentation and in particular the use of randomised control trials.

These two strands of *theory* and *method* broadly align with interpretations of behavioural insights as an act of drawing on knowledge (academic and scientific theories of heuristics and biases) and behavioural insights as producing knowledge (through interviews and randomised control trials). Policy actors sometimes used these two strands when talking about behavioural insights projects. In the excerpt below the public servant talks about behavioural insights as *theory*, where principles are used to change the wording in letters, and the second strand of behavioural insights as *method* where they test and use trials to see ‘what works’. He said,

Some projects, we will have a very clear opportunity to apply a very classically defined behavioural insights solution. So, we might say, I've done some work around redesigning letters that get sent out to people and we might be able to

incorporate a version into the wording and that would be very much within the behavioural insights agreement. But, then other times, our behavioural insights approach has been just to test whether the policy is working at all, and having good outcomes measures in place and being willing to say, this is working, it's not working, here's some data to back it up. (PS20)

These two strands of drawing on research and testing what works align with different concepts of Weiss (1979) problem-solving model of research utilisation which I go onto discuss below.

I note here however that behavioural insights, as an approach, could be framed as aligning with the knowledge-driven model of research. In Weiss' (1979) knowledge-driven model, research may expose new policy opportunities or policy problems. In the context of behavioural insights, research from psychology and behavioural economics has revealed that people are not rational, but are instead subject to different biases and use heuristics in their thinking which means they can err in their decision making (Tversky and Kahneman 1974). This knowledge has revealed the reasons traditional policy tools may not work as they assume people are rational in their thinking. This knowledge has also created new opportunities to apply behavioural insights to policy, introducing new tools and ways of thinking. I consider this in Chapter 7, but note here that some policy actors did talk about rationality in the context of behavioural insights. For example, they mentioned that behavioural insights contradicts traditional tools such as cost-benefit analysis and takes into account “the non-existence of rational actors” (PS4). For many policy actors however, biases and heuristics were an important way of providing evidence in the design of policy. That is,

more importance was attached to biases and heuristics as a way of finding what works, than as a way of refuting of economic paradigms in policy.

In behavioural insights, the drawing of knowledge (on biases and heuristics), and the production of knowledge, align with two approaches to the use of evidence in Weiss' (1979) problem-solving model of research utilisation. In the first approach, pre-existing research is discovered or sought by policy actors. Although this research may not always be directly applicable to the current context or circumstance it can be developed or adapted to solve the policy problem (Weiss 1979). Behavioural insights can be understood as firstly, prior research (from the academic sciences) that is drawn on to inform behavioural insights projects. In the second approach research may be commissioned to 'fill the knowledge gap' to address the specific policy problem (Weiss 1979, 428). Here research users engage research producers to investigate the problem. Aligning with the instrumental use of knowledge in these approaches it is assumed that the policy problem is defined and agreed upon and policy problems have a taken for granted status. Behavioural insights projects may produce knowledge by undertaking research specifically for the policy issue. These meanings of research utilisation may be used concurrently or as different stages in behavioural insights practice. I have mapped these concepts onto the behavioural insights phases I developed from the data (see Figure 5-1 below). In the 'understand phase' policy actors drew on the principles of behavioural insights from academic theory by undertaking literature searches. They also sometimes produced knowledge through qualitative methods. Policy actors implied they could develop better solutions through better understanding the problem. In the 'test phase', policy actors trialled potential policy interventions. Policy actors sometimes drew on academic knowledge when developing interventions to use in their 'test phase'. For example, they might include

different principles, such as a gain frame (if you do X you will gain Y) or loss frame (if you do X you will lose Y) in different versions of a letter. These letters or other nudges would then be tested usually through a trial such as a randomised control trial. The intervention which encouraged more of the desired behaviour would be presented as the most effective approach. This pattern has been captured in the analytical model below and is used to examine knowledge in the following sections.

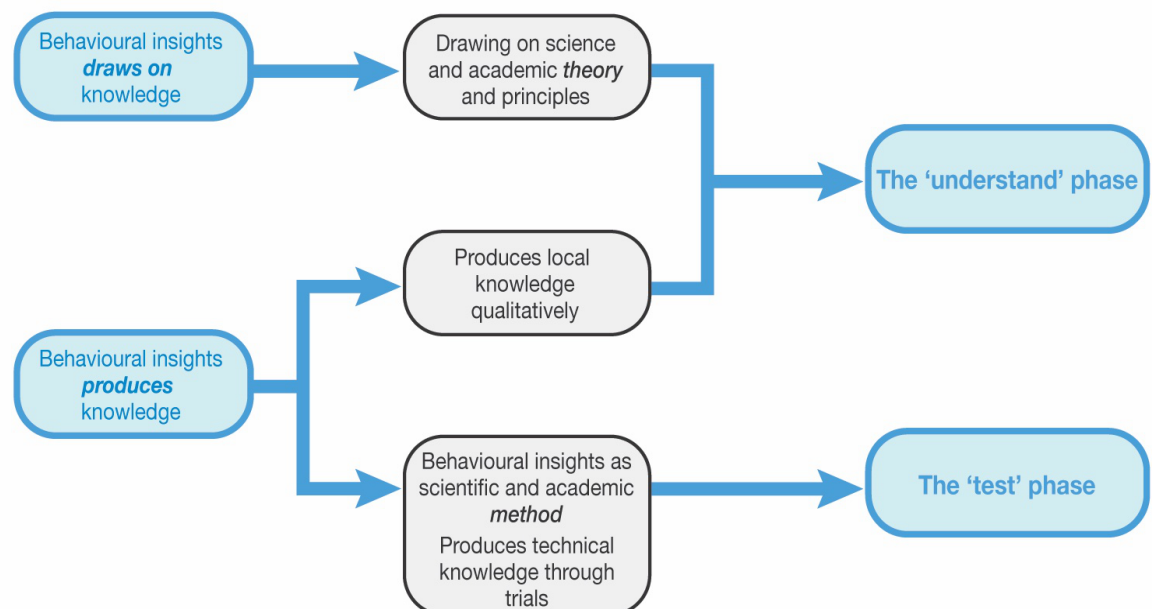


Figure 5-1

I have developed this framework of behavioural insights phases from the interviews. However, most policy actors did not use this terminology when describing their

approach to behavioural insights projects. The exception was policy actors from one team who talked about using ‘understand, test, adapt’ in behavioural insights. These insights have been incorporated into the sections below on the ‘understand phase’ and ‘test phase’. I note that although they referenced an ‘adapt phase’ of their behavioural insights process, this was never spoken about in their interviews. At the time this was not the focus of my interviews, so I did not query this, however this may be because the ‘adapt phase’ was seen as something that was responsibility of project owners, or because it was not relevant to the interviews. Alternatively, it may be because this phase becomes merged with evaluation of the project which was not seen as the domain of behavioural insights actors.

This framework partly reflects official government reports on behavioural insights. For example, the NSW behavioural insights team outline their approach of “understand, build, test” (Department of Premier and Cabinet (NSW) 2014), and the UK BIT team have advocated for the “Test, Learn Adapt” approach. I now turn to the next section which examines how behavioural insights draws on academic knowledge.

5.4 BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS AS DRAWING ON AND PRODUCING KNOWLEDGE

5.4.1 Behavioural insights as drawing on academic theory

Policy actors spoke of how the principles of nudge and the theory of biases and heuristics came from academic disciplines. This drawing of *theory* from these academic and scientific disciplines, such as psychology, behavioural economics, sociology and neuroscience supports a technical understanding of knowledge in behavioural insights. Academic research and information is typically associated with technical knowledge (Yanow 2004). The drawing of technical knowledge to inform projects occurred during the ‘understand phase’ of the behavioural insights process.

When public servants explained their approaches to developing a behavioural insights project, in this first 'understand phase' they searched the literature, concentrating on academic papers from psychology and behavioural economics to get a better understanding of the problem. Policy actors explained the 'understand phase' was a way to articulate and consider the behavioural elements of the problem.

The role of academic knowledge appeared to play an important role in the legitimacy of behavioural insights, and in the following chapter I examine how knowledge is linked to science in a 'making' of evidence. I note here though that some policy actors expressed scepticism about the strength of the academic research underpinning behavioural insights.

Both academic consultants and public servants commented that behavioural insights research was not always replicable, referring to the concept that scientific studies should achieve the same results when repeated. One public servant suggested that the evidence for behavioural insights was underwhelming. She went on to comment that,

we're all quoting the same 30 odd papers around at each other...the reading I'm doing is run by government and government processes. I think the academics have got to claw it back, and you know, give us a bit more to work with. (PS14)

Here the policy actors interpret the technical knowledge which behavioural insights draws on as the domain or even responsibility of academia, drawing boundaries in the

roles of academics as knowledge producers and public servants as knowledge users. This interpretation of the knowledge process, where knowledge is produced by academic researchers and then applied by users, is often espoused by knowledge utilisation theories (Webber 1991). Feitsma (2018) has also suggested that behavioural insights assumes an instrumental rationality of supply and demand of knowledge between academic institutions and government (Feitsma 2018). However, many of the policy actors were both users of knowledge, as they drew on academic theory, and producers of knowledge, through research and testing as I discuss in the next section. For example, policy actors may use pre-existing research from behavioural economics to provide suggestions as to which biases lead to people paying their taxes late, but then produce research to test these suggestions. This finding supports other literature which argues behavioural insights practitioners do not fit easily into the supply and demand theory (Lepenies and Malecka 2020). Other research has also suggested there may be three parties in knowledge utilisation, with behavioural insights practitioners conceived as knowledge brokers whose role is to provide knowledge and information to research users, drawing on craft and local knowledge (Feitsma 2019). They have also been theorised as advisory entrepreneurs, who connect research and policymaking as well as advocating for the approach (Mukherjee and Giest 2020). The challenge to fit behavioural insights practitioners into one or other group more fundamentally highlights challenges in the theories of linear policy making and the direct application of knowledge to solve policy problems. Rather, as I go on to explore in the next chapter, knowledge is labelled and contested in political processes, and knowledge is advocated for and criticised rather than produced and used by the same or different parties.

5.4.2 Behavioural insights produces local knowledge

Policy actors drew on academic knowledge through literature reviews in the 'understand phase' but also sometimes produced knowledge through qualitative research. This phase was used by both academic consultants working with government and public servants. One of the public servants I spoke to explained their approach to behavioural insights projects. They said,

So we pretty much always are starting with a lit review, a data analysis if we can get our hands on the data, ...And what else are we doing? And then ideally, we'd be doing some field work, interviews. We haven't done observations yet as far as I'm aware... we're trying to do it all of it ourselves. Because I think that way is sort of building all the knowledge on your own, and so then ideally after those we try to triangulate those three points of data, to understand maybe what interventions might work. (PS17)

The public servant describes first accessing academic literature to draw on pre-existing behavioural insights research and theory, as well as analysing available data on the issue. They explain how they would also try to do field work and interviews so they are "building all the knowledge". This knowledge that the public servant describes was the local knowledge of clients and service users. Another public servant commented that understanding the policy problem through client perspectives was not often incorporated in government, as public servants are in "ivory towers" (PS2) and removed from the "people on the street". This advantage of behavioural insights was reiterated by other public servants who explained that the benefits of behavioural

insights included that it helped public servants to work from the perspective of the client and to try and improve the client experience. This reflects calls from some practitioner institutions to include qualitative knowledge, suggesting a wider interest in other knowledges in behavioural insights. For example, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre advocates for an increased use of qualitative research in behavioural studies for policy making. They argue that the inclusion of qualitative approaches allows policy makers to "uncover the meaning of people's behaviour, as defined from their own point of view" (Van Bavel and Dessart 2018, 7). Understanding the meaning to service users can help explain actions, or their behaviours.

In my research, policy actors perceived that accessing and incorporating local knowledge into policy design, conceived as the perspectives and experiences of the client or everyday person on the street, was a way of improving outcomes. One public servant spoke about how they were trying to improve their clients experience, and behavioural insights allowed them to "step into the shoes of the client a bit more" (PS15). This helped the public servant to understand why in certain issues in service delivery might occur, rather than expecting people will comply with legal requirements. Academic work has also argued that policy work can be improved by considering local knowledge. For example, in the area of the environment, Fisher (2000) has argued that local knowledge is "essential" in policy problems. For Fisher, local knowledge plays an important, but complimentary role, to technical knowledge. It is a way of broadening the knowledge base on which to make policy decisions. While local knowledge is necessary to both understand and solve problems (Fischer 2000). Fisher argues there is also a normative imperative to include local knowledge and that the public should contribute to policy making.

I also heard this perspective from participants. One public servant argued that their ethnographic work in the 'understand phase' of behavioural insights was a way of including the perspectives of service users in the policies that affect them. She said "They should have a voice and a choice" (PS16). In this way behavioural insight is seen as empowering communities. This was not a perspective offered in many interviews. When this idea of empowerment was discussed by policy actors, it was more often in the context of co-design. For example, one policy actor was committed to behavioural insights as empowering communities. He talked about moving away from the paternalism of behavioural insights to a more co-design approach that emphasises agency and community building rather than service delivery. He commented that,

By bringing people who live with the issue on a day-to-day basis, by bringing them into the mix, you're actually inviting a broader range of expertise to kind of go, "Well what might that look like, that theoretical kind of aspect look like in this particular person's lived experience or their context?" Then you're actually creating I think a much more comprehensive series of ... I don't know ... policy options or actions that can really speak to both the theory and the evidence and the lived experience that people have on a day-to-day basis. That for me that's the big shift that we're making... That's to me the biggest thing that we need to tackle in terms of that idea that behavioural insights or nudging is paternalistic. Because it shouldn't be about taking away decisions from people; it should be about helping people have a much deeper understanding of these sorts of social issues. Then together as a society determining what are the things that are really important to us that we stand for? What are our values and how does this necessarily align with that? I think that's really important. (PS8)

Here the public servant spoke of the importance of introducing local knowledge, described here as “lived experience” into policy making. This knowledge, he argued, leads to “more comprehensive” policy options. Here he connects the inclusion of local knowledge to improved policy making, and a move away from the paternalism, and expert-led nature of nudge which has been a repeated criticism of the approach. This reflects recent academic viewpoints which suggest that the paternalism of nudging and behavioural insights is irrelevant in the European context, as the way it is applied seeks to improve people’s lives through providing information, rather than directing them unconsciously (Baggio et al. 2021). However, in the interview, the public servant was talking about lived experience and local knowledge in the context of co-design. He commented,

I think there’s a real statement about what’s often referred to as co-design. In its simplest terms people living with the issues that might be tackled.... actually bringing them along that journey. (PS8)

Co-design, as a participatory approach that emphasises the importance and inclusion of local knowledge and expertise in policy design (Blomkamp 2018), takes a normative stance that the community *should* participate in policy making and service delivery. Several participants mentioned co-design when discussing behavioural insights projects. Some policy actors used the term co-design to describe the incorporation of craft knowledge. For example, centralised behavioural insights teams would describe drawing on the craft knowledge of the team the project had come from to develop their

understanding of the context and policy problem or to workshop potential solutions. I consider this further in the following chapter. For some respondents, however, co-design was the term used to describe the incorporation of local knowledge into the process. They incorporated aspects of co-design in their behavioural insights projects in this 'understand phase', where they drew on the experiences of clients or service users to inform the development of services or interventions. In some ways, this suggests a move towards more participatory approaches to nudge practices. Participatory design in nudging "encourages different collaborative forms of knowledge production among a variety of expert and non-expert agents and a path towards renewed trust between citizens and institutions" (Leone and Tallacchini 2019, 149).

However, these co-design elements were often spoken about in a way that was seen as complementary to behavioural insights processes, or as an approach that arose alongside behavioural insights. One public servant spoke about how their team swung between design thinking and behavioural insights depending on the capabilities in the team and the interests of their director. Another public servant said,

I think there's some interesting similarities and differences between nudge and design thinking and I don't think it's a coincidence that the behavioural insight team has emerged in the same part of the department that does the design stuff. (PS4)

I note here that co-design is conceived of as a methodology and process, with iterative stages (Blomkamp 2018). This thesis does not seek to assess whether the participants were doing 'real' co-design, or the overlap between co-design and design thinking, and how knowledge is used specifically in these approaches is outside the scope of

this thesis. However, I include these comments on co-design as it was used by some participants when discussing the importance of local knowledge. The contrasting and comparing of co-design to behavioural insights identified in these quotes suggests co-design, and the emphasis on the importance of local knowledge and empowering communities, is separate from behavioural insights. The concept of community participation and empowering community sits outside traditional or more common interpretations of the role of knowledge in behavioural insights.

One academic consultant specifically mentioned the challenges in incorporating difference voices and vulnerable groups in behavioural policy making. She commented that,

We've got to engage with whoever our stakeholders are and discuss it with them because the top down approach is patronising and actually perspectives are different. (AC8)

As an example, she explained one way to conserve water during times of drought was to stop watering lawns and let them go brown and die. Yet she had found that this was culturally unacceptable for some populations, as such lawns reflected badly on the individual and the household. She went on to say,

Once again we see people in positions of power, white, middle-class, well educated, male, older; it's a very specific demographic. And what they see as being acceptable may not conform with what that entire audience is doing. (AC8)

The academic consultant seemed to be reflecting on the marginalising of voices in policy and the expert led hierarchical nature of evidence-based policy. However, this emphasis on including community voices did not reflect her research practice. Her projects did not involve action research or co-design or more traditional participatory research, but rather involved interviews with stakeholders which was then analysed by her and other researchers to design an intervention. Thus, while she was advocating for the inclusion of local voices, these voices were then analysed and utilised by experts in policy, conflicting with the democratic ethos espoused by local knowledge advocates (Yanow 2007). Greenwood and Levin (2007) argued that often researchers assume that local knowledge can be,

subjected to formal manipulations and comparison, hypothesized, synthesized, and theorized outside of the local context...What is valid, interesting, important, and trivial is treated as the professional researcher's decision, not to be second-guessed by amateurs. (Greenwood and Levin 2007, 105)

This was a pattern in the above interview and others in my research. Policy actors interpreted local knowledge as something to be accessed through ethnographic research, interviews and focus groups with clients. This knowledge was about understanding the behaviour that pertained to the problem, and was then used by public servants to address the particular policy problem. This reflects some assertions in the literature that “recovering local knowledge can be treated as a technique like a survey” (Rhodes 2016a,192). Rhodes goes on to discuss how this data can be

collected in stories. While he directly refutes that technical knowledge standards are appropriate for local knowledge, and argues that local knowledge can be also used to 'give voice', in my research this knowledge is 'utilised' by public servants. In my research, local knowledge was often treated like any type of data. Local knowledge was separated from normative knowledge of clients and the community about what should be done to address the problem, and was not used to question the problem representation.

Academic literature intertwines local knowledge and normative knowledge. Both Yanow's (Yanow 2000; 2004) and Fischer's (Fischer 2000) definitions of local knowledge incorporate knowledge of the local context, community or conditions with the normative, what should be done. However, in behavioural insights, although I note this might pertain to policymaking more broadly, the empirical is riven from the normative. Local knowledge is something to be accessed and used by policy actors and what should be done with that knowledge is also the domain of policy actors. Thus local knowledge still conforms, or actors seek to make it conform, with an instrumental approach to policy making, with local knowledge seen as evidence which can be applied directly to policy problems. I suggest this is because local knowledge was required to conform to the instrumental application of knowledge in behavioural insights.

Throughout these interviews I observed a tension between the importance policy actors attached to including local knowledge and the struggle to fit this into a process of evidence-based policy making that privileged research based, technical knowledge. For example, one public servant who worked in a behavioural insights unit was using ethnographic research in a behavioural insights project. She seemed to feel compelled

to reinforce the validity of the research by emphasising that there were “150 hours” of observations, and “a whole room of post it notes”. Even so, when sharing the results with the broader project team, she recalled that it was not received positively. She felt it was dismissed as people “want data. And they want firmer data than ethnographic data” (PS1).

To illustrate these tensions between the importance of local knowledge, and the instrumental application of knowledge in behavioural insights that supports the importance of technical knowledge, here I focus in on an interview with a policy actor (PS16). This policy actor, who was a public servant in a behavioural insights team, spoke in depth on local knowledge, local perspectives and incorporating a broader range of research methods beyond trials and experiments.

The public servant talked about the importance of understanding their clients’ perspectives, and as I briefly mentioned above, how behavioural insights is a way of providing agency to their clients as it gives them a voice. She said,

I think the association really that I see, that we've heard as well as some times, is this paternalistic kind of state. Think of, we're going to tell you what to do, and we're going to make you do this. Which, actually ... most of the things that we come up with are about how to give more self-determination and agency to our clients...They should have a voice and a choice, and some of the reasons why they are the way they are, is because we don't give them any. So we are seen very much as the advocates for the client, which is really interesting. It goes back to the ethnography, to the point sometimes...It's this kind of, no, actually, have you talked to the client? What do you think? What are they going

to do? You can't just say this is going to happen. How can you be surprised if the outcome isn't what you expected? (PS16)

This public servant suggested that while behavioural insights is often seen as paternalistic, they use behavioural insights to argue for their clients and to have their perspectives incorporated in policy making. The implied alternative is that without behavioural insights these voices would not be represented. This reflects the importance some participants attached to local knowledge. She described an ethnographic project that looked at different cohorts such as those who had refused a program, those who had completed and those who had dropped out. She compared this approach to "big data" which can tell you "patterns" but not the "why". She believed that the value her team added to their department is their ethnographic approach and in understanding their clients. When talking about the project she said,

we have a noble way of looking at things. A way that is perhaps not the usual way. I don't know how to explain it. Like, even in the case of what I just described to you in the ethnography, I went twice to the board. One only with the findings, "This is what I found." And I provided quotes, and pretty much unadulterated quotes. "This is what people are saying." It was powerful, as in they don't get that exposure to ... there's such a big disconnect between people at the very executive level, and what's going on, on the ground. I don't know how to explain it. It's really like, you don't see that. At this level, you can't see that. This is what I'm bringing to you. (PS16)

This policy actor used normative knowledge to support her ethnographic research. Here she uses normative knowledge to support local knowledge, describing her approach as 'noble', and throughout the interview argued this is an approach that *should* be used in policy making. I explore this intertwining of local and normative knowledge further in the next chapter, arguing this is also a political use of knowledge.

This public servant, who espoused the nobility of including local voices and empowering communities, also made comments throughout the interview on the importance and even superiority of technical knowledge produced through randomised control trials. For example, the policy actor was explaining a randomised control trial they had undertaken which tested two letters, with one letter using the behavioural insight technique of loss aversion the other a gain frame. They trialled the letters over three months, but didn't have any results almost a year later. This was mainly because of challenges in accessing data because of privacy issues with partner agencies and poor or sporadic collection of data. She went on to say,

Public servant: It's been a nightmare ... we have a secretary who is lovely, saying, oh we need to do more RCT's but there's nothing internally in place to allow for that in a timely way.

Me: It seems quite an experience. It's interesting that you say the secretary is quite keen for more randomised trials

Public servant: When you think logically, of course it makes sense. It's the most robust way of testing. It will be building evidence, it's about building evidence. ...But, what it takes to get to that, I don't think he understands. ... hard to refute,

for example, especially if you go through an RCT, that it's not evidence-based.
(PS16)

Here she interprets the senior executive wanting more randomised control trials as understandable as it is the most robust way of testing interventions, reinforcing the privileging of technical knowledge and methods in policy making. Further, randomised control trials produce evidence that is difficult to question or challenge. However, this same policy actor also described the importance of including unadulterated quotes as evidence in policy making. Thus there is a tension between the desire to include and incorporate local knowledge, and the need to privilege technical knowledge, using data and statistics, to conform with the evidence-based policy making paradigm.

Yanow (2000) has suggested that local knowledge is largely ignored in evidence-based policy making, however my research suggests a more complicated relationship. As others have found, behavioural insights has started incorporating local knowledge practices (Ball and Feitsma 2020; Ball and Head 2021). Recent research by Ball (2021) is instructive here, and although it does not focus on the role of knowledge, it explores behavioural insights in Australia. As I examined in Chapter 2 she found three interpretations of behavioural insights. Behavioural insights as 'what works' sees behavioural insights as associated with 'rigour' and the importance of testing and trialling projects, particularly randomised control trials. This interpretation was tied to public servants' beliefs that policy should be developed from evidence. Secondly behavioural insights were interpreted as nudges, and small tweaks to projects, which was influenced by beliefs of the importance of efficiency and bureaucracy. The final behavioural insights interpretation was citizen-focussed. This interpretation included

more participatory approaches, aligning with empowering citizens and providing agency to the community. It was formed from ideas on the importance of including local voices and citizen input in policy making. In the research she maps these interpretations onto different types of policy actors. Those in the central government team who were academically orientated interpreted behavioural insights as 'what works'. Those who partnered with the central government department interpreted behavioural insights as nudges, and finally a smaller number of participants viewed behavioural insights as citizen focussed.

Ball (2021) argues that there is confusion over understandings of behavioural insights, but that "participants displayed one of three distinct interpretations of behavioural insights, and these interpretations, in turn, played a role in determining how it would be put into practice" (Ball 2021, 7). My research however, suggests that policy makers may hold multiple interpretations of behavioural insights, rather than ascribing these interpretations to different sets of actors. In the context of the knowledge there were policy actors that interpreted a role for behavioural insights as citizen centred, and attributed great importance to local knowledge, but also interpreted behavioural insights as what works and placed importance on producing technical knowledge in behavioural insights. The importance of these knowledges were in tension and conflict. I build on this observation in the next chapter where I examine how the policy context shapes which knowledge policy actors support or advocate for. However here I consider further this tension between local and technical knowledge.

Feitsma (2018) has suggested that local knowledge in behavioural insights may be devalued as it cannot be systematised in the way technical knowledge can and therefore cannot contribute to the 'body of knowledge'. My research suggests that

local knowledge may be seen as valuable, potentially even distinctive to behavioural insights, however policy actors struggle to both claim the importance of local knowledge and conform to an evidence-based policy making paradigm which elevates technical knowledge as somehow more compelling or legitimate. As examined above policy actors may separate local knowledge from client's normative knowledge and apply it instrumentally, or try to 'fit' local knowledge by holding it to technical standards, which is how local knowledge may be treated in evidence-based policy (Fraser and Davis 2019, 198).

In my research, local knowledge was contained within the 'understand phase'. The use of the difference phases suggests that local knowledge can be and is compartmentalised and seen as separate from the 'test phase' which produces quantitative data and statistics through randomised control trials and testing. Here policy actors 'compartmentalise' knowledges, although technical knowledge is intertwined with other knowledges (Lindblom and Cohen 1979; Yanow 2000) and indeed can strengthen policy making (Tenbensel 2006).

Policy actors' efforts to separate local and technical knowledge may explain the contradictions, and even discomfort of policy actors as they try to reconcile or resolve the importance of local knowledge with the expectations of adhering to and producing technical knowledge. Policy actors interpret technical knowledge as either more compelling or legitimate, and act to include local knowledge by fitting it to technical standards or into a separate phase. However, this forcing of local knowledge into technical processes potentially undermines the approach. The use of local knowledge is associated with a more democratic approach to policy making (Yanow 2007). Attempts to instrumentalise local knowledge risks undermining trust in the

government. For example, in Australia, community groups have criticised governments for claiming the use of co-design processes, when policy decisions have been made (Donaldson, 2017). Here government claims on community input were met with accusations of disrespect as the community input had not been adequately considered or respected. Although this is the area of co-design, the research is instructive for behavioural insights. I suggest that if local knowledge is taken and then 'used' for purposes that does not align with community values, or even to make use of people's biases and nudge them into decisions they might not choose to take, this would undermine trust in governments importance of local knowledge in participatory practices. The compartmentalising of knowledges and placing local knowledge into an 'understand phase', also frames local knowledge as optional or not vital to the policy making process, and may be side lined as needed. The use of local knowledge in this way undermines the democratic potential to include more voices, and deepen understanding of policy problems and solutions. Rather, such voices are interpreted through the policy actors, or experts, experience, reinforcing a technical application of the knowledge.

While the policy actors included in this section acknowledged the importance of local knowledge, there were policy actors for whom local knowledge was not considered and the 'method' of behavioural insights of trials and experiments that produced technical knowledge was the focus of behavioural insights. I examine this 'test phase' in the following section.

5.5 BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS AS PRODUCING TECHNICAL KNOWLEDGE

5.5.1 The role of trials in behavioural insights

In this section I explore how behavioural insights is seen as an evidence-based approach as it produces knowledge through trials and experimentation. Throughout the interviews, policy actors drew attention to the central and important role of trials in behavioural insights. When I asked one public servant (PS14) what she saw as the strengths of the behavioural insights approach, her immediate response was that behavioural insights had increased the use of trials. She explained that other teams in her area now understand the importance of undertaking trials and have gone on to partner with her team to use a trial on a project. The public servant talked about randomised control trials as the gold standard and expressed a desire for more experimentation. Many of the policy actors talked about randomised control trials as an aspiration or standard on projects. For example, in the exchange below, the academic consultant was talking about his experiences working with government actors on projects. Talking about randomised control trials he said,

I've only been there not quite two years, but one of the guys who was there from the start said that back when they started it was near impossible to get government agencies to recognise the value in randomised control trials, and now we're getting phone calls from even small little councils and small departments saying 'hey can we develop something and test it using a randomised control'. So there's definitely something, that kind of rigour of evaluating the effects using a RCT...I think has been really important I think to the wider government. And broadly...I think there is a little bit of scepticism in some parts about the value, people who haven't had a lot to do with this sort of area, and they haven't seen the randomised control trials, sometimes, you

know it's not all the agencies I've worked with, but at a couple of them, there's been behavioural science sceptics if you like, and I don't know, they don't quite get it I guess, but on the whole I'd say generally pretty positive, and especially when you can demonstrate the effects using randomised control trials, when your saying that adding this message will increase your payments by about 10 million dollars a year...they're going to pay attention to that. (AC4)

In this excerpt the academic consultant was discussing his perception of the growth in acceptance and enthusiasm for randomised control trials. He talks about “rigour”, reinforcing the technical evidence that these trials produce. Although he notes the scepticism about randomised control trials in some areas, he dismisses those agencies as not understanding, saying “they don't get it”. This suggests that he has little scepticism himself of the use of trials and experimentation. This pattern of privileging randomised control trials, seemingly uncritically, was something that emerged in the interviews. Policy actors reiterated comments that randomised control trials are the gold standard, and they have become entrenched at the top of evidence-based policy hierarchies (Nutley, Davies, and Hughes 2019). The use of randomised control trials in behavioural insights in Australia was influenced by the UK behavioural insights team who strongly advocated for these trials as the best way to understand what works (Haynes et al. 2012).

One public servant's (PS11) team only worked on projects where they are able to undertake randomised control trials. I asked her what drove this preference for testing projects through trials and she said the team was established and committed to doing randomised control trials as they wanted “the evidence”. This suggests that, from her

perspective, only randomised control trials can produce knowledge that can be called evidence. The team did not proceed through an 'understand phase' before commencing testing. Literature reviews were used to determine if similar trials had been undertaken. This policy actor explained that most departments have good knowledge of the issue and her role is about testing projects to change that behaviour rather than question or interrogate that knowledge. She explained,

I'm gonna say at this point we're more attracted to RCTs where there seems to be some understanding within the department already about what's driving the behaviour, rather than a just complete unknown. Like, I have no idea why people are doing this. Mostly it's not surprising, people who are running the programme, have a pretty good understanding about the programme and how it's changed, and the people within that cohort and what they're doing, and things like that. Then, I think it's a matter of going in and just looking at different methods and approaches. (PS11)

Here the policy actor sees understanding the problem as irrelevant to their role, as understanding the problem is the responsibility of their partner department of agency. This aligns with an interpretation of behavioural insights as a linear, instrumental process or method of producing evidence. Her role is to solve the policy problem as it is presented to them, rather than question or understand the problem. The way in which these policy actors spoke suggested that evidence and knowledge is used to solve these given policy problems. This reflects a technical understanding of policy problems as given with technical evidence required to provide a solution (Fischer 2006).

Randomised control trials are so central to the behavioural insights approach used by this public servant that the ability to test the efficacy of projects in this way directed the selection of projects. The interpretation of randomised control trials as producing 'evidence' led the policy actor to undertake certain projects and reject others. For example, when talking about the selection of projects, she said,

heaps of agencies put in project suggestions, basically. We had about 50 of those. Then we went through a process of figuring out which of them were actual behavioural economics problems. Then, which ones were solvable. Then, which ones had data and could run an RCT, and a bunch of other criteria about not just being kind of novel and interesting, but actually being relevant. And being able to take it somewhere to be useful. (PS11)

The model of this team was akin to a consultancy, and in the excerpt above she describes how various departments or agencies would submit proposals. Her team would then choose a project to work on and then hand back results and recommendations at the end of the trial. Thus having a project selected for a trial resulted in significant additional expertise, personnel and financial resources for a team or department. Projects were selected on the basis of whether they were a behavioural economic problem and if they were solvable, and I discuss these implications further in my third empirical chapter. The policy actor also spoke of selecting projects that had data and could run use a randomised control trials.

In the interviews, this requirement to show statistical significance shaped the projects undertaken by behavioural insights teams. Randomised control trials require at least

two groups of people to compare results and, to ensure results are statistically significant, require large sample sizes in the target populations. Policy actors talked about having to “hunt” (PS22) for a project, or find trials that had enough sample to be “worth investigating” (AC3). I asked one public servant how they had chosen the sites for a project using a randomised control trials and she commented that “It came down to there has to be a certain number in order for the numbers to count.” (PS19). Policy actors explained how projects were selected on the basis of having large samples so that they could test statistical significance. The projects also had to target behaviour that was easily measurable so they could see if the intervention was effective. For example, I heard that some health behaviours were selected for behavioural insights projects as the potential success of the project could be observed with a simple tick or cross. These examples indicate that the perceived importance of using trials, often randomised control trials, directed the projects they selected and the problems they were able to address.

Behavioural insights teams also reported running randomised control trials on projects that were completely separate from behavioural insights as *theory*. That is, they may test a project using a randomised control trials that did not include drawing on or applying behavioural insights principles. For example, one public servant spoke of how they sometimes worked on projects where the methodology was associated with behavioural insights, but the project did not apply behavioural insights principles. Here “the methodology is more drawn from research psychology and research economics. It's all about testing what works” (PS20). He commented that while they would implement a trial or evaluation without behavioural insights, rarely did they investigate a problem in the ‘understand phase’ without the associated ‘test phase’. This reinforces the privileging of quantitative methods such as randomised control trials

and technical knowledge production in behavioural insights, even above behavioural insights principles.

Although randomised control trials were held up as the gold standard, policy actors commented that it was not always possible to run these trials. Absent, poor quality or limited data were cited as barriers to running these trials. One public servant (PS6) commented that they can't run a two-year trial, because at the end of a two-year funding cycle you need to have "an outcome" and not just "some knowledge". While this comment was in the context of pragmatic budgetary considerations, it also reflects criticisms I heard of academic approaches to policy making, such as the use of randomised control trials, which I explore in the following chapter. Others commented that randomised control trials required additional resources or expertise which they did not have access to. Policy actors struggled with the practicalities of running these trials but did not question the legitimacy of the evidence produced through randomised control trials. Pearce and Raman (2014) have argued that the focus on randomised control trials comes at the expense of other knowledge, in particular qualitative knowledge, and ultimately narrows the evidence base as it reduces the knowledge which may be considered evidence that can inform policy. My research supports this and suggests that the drive to undertake randomised control trials may also be narrowing what are considered worthy policy problems. The projects and policy problems that are not selected by behavioural insight teams for randomised control trials may not be afforded additional resources and visibility. I explore this further in the following chapters.

In my interviews, policy actors reiterated the need for evidence and the importance of evidence-based approaches by emphasising the link between randomised control

trials and evidence-based policy making. However, one of the key criticisms of randomised control trials which I examined in Chapter 3 is that they often do not account for context. That is, the results of a randomised control trial demonstrating that a policy will work in one context does not mean that it will work in another (Cartwright 2013; Deaton and Cartwright 2018). In my research though, context was used as a justification for running randomised control trials. Policy actors commented that they needed to undertake randomised control trials to demonstrate the effectiveness of a behavioural insights intervention because of 'context'. Policy actors talked about context in terms of the importance of geographical context. People in different geographic location and different groups may respond to nudging in different ways. Policy actors argued that projects that were implemented in the UK required testing in Australia as they may not be effective because of the different contexts. For example, one policy actor spoke about how it is only recently that they have the data available to compare across countries, such as the UK, Australia and Singapore. He said,

when we went round government departments, after set up and we used all these examples from academia. A very fair question from policy makers was always, "Well that's great, that's really interesting. But does it work in my education system, my justice system, my tax system?" And the honest answer was we couldn't say. (PS9)

The policy actors reflect an understanding of technical knowledge produced from randomised control trials that is geographically, historically and culturally bounded, although the technical knowledge produced by randomised control trials in the literature is described as objective, ahistorical and abstracted (Yanow 2004). Yet while

policy makers discussed context as the reason for randomised control trials few questioned the technical evidence that it produced or their right to then use that evidence to argue for the implementation of the project. Here, again the method of randomised control trials produces evidence of the effectiveness of a nudge project that is inarguable in a different context. While the academic literature recognises both the limitations of randomised control trials and the different types of expertise or knowledge needed in the process (Cartwright and Hardie 2012), in policy practice, the method itself provides the inarguable evidence. In the next section I turn to how randomised control trials and the privileging of technical data is associated with a focus on data and measurability.

5.5.2 Knowledge as quantifiable data

Policy actors emphasised the importance of randomised control trials, but also quantitative research and data in behavioural insights generally. Policy actors spoke of the importance of having data as evidence to solve policy problems. For example, one public servant commented,

so far, in having conversations with people in other departments, our starting point is what's your data that you've got now. So, for example, ... I don't know where this guy was from, some other department ... he was talking about compliance. And his gut feel was they don't have very good compliance. You know, whoever they're giving grants to or whatever. And they don't have a lot of power. So we were like what can we do at the front end to improve that. So we were talking about what is the data you have now and what could we do and what would be the data at the end showing that it's actually ... yeah, we're very, I guess firm on the whole evidence-based. I mean the whole point is this

thing is not a fluffy thing, that there is actually evidence to back up this stuff.
(PS13)

The public servant anchors behavioural insights in data and been data-led. She explicitly links data to evidence saying they are very firm on being evidence- based. Moreover, it is evidence that is “not fluffy”, implying that other types of evidence are not as authoritative. This aligns with evidence-based policy making which privileges ‘hard’ evidence and technical knowledge, such as large quantitative studies (Papanagnou 2011). The emphasis on measurement and quantitative data reflects the dominance of technical knowledge in instrumental applications of knowledge in policy making. One public servant (PS15) spoke of the importance of measuring interventions. She made comments such as “And so that is done in a very, highly measurable way”, and “I don't really want to be doing work that's not measurable”. When I asked her to think about the future of behavioural insights, the policy actor talked about how if she had a magic wand, she would make everyone more ‘mindful’ of trialling and measuring. Yet while the policy actor spoke of the importance of measuring, at other times she recalled instances when not everything can be measured. For example, she recalled a project where the population to be targeted may have included a sample of only 40. She commented that “So that's very difficult in such a small market, to do. How do you test that?” This comment illustrates the perception that quantitative measures, and the ability to test work quantitatively, is something to be strived for.

While quantitative data was privileged, policy actors also developed ‘hierarchies within hierarchies’ of evidence. Quantitative evidence was privileged over other forms of

knowledge; however different types of quantitative data were interpreted as more impactful. For example, the ability to talk of statistical significance was seen as more authoritative than percentages. In the excerpt below, the public servant was talking about the reasons for using behavioural insights on a project,

Me: Ok, so it was an opportunity to try something new and different.

Public servant: And also get results, as in get proper academic results, rather than we put out a survey and 60% of people responded. This was like, within a confidence interval, we can actually be sure this was significant. And that really excited me, just from someone who I suppose recently did my Masters, so therefore remember how important that is. (PS21)

Here she is talking about how working with the behavioural insight teams meant she was able to produce evidence which she saw as more authoritative than a survey. The statistics, she explained, provided her with the rationale to take decisive action. The linear process the public servant describes where statistics is used to ‘take action’ illustrates how behavioural insights is interpreted as an instrumental application of knowledge. It also underscores that some evidence counts for more, and some counts for less. The contrasting of “proper academic results” with a survey suggests that the type of knowledge produced through trials is seen as more legitimate than a survey in public policy. She returned to this point later saying,

so again what I was saying, talking about results, talking about reaching a certain number of people in a sample to make it statistically significant. ... from

our point of view, and I can speak definitely from our team, we just don't have that level of, we just don't operate like that. If we test things... I don't know, 40 said this, and this is what we're going with because of those 40. Or even sometimes the point which I find difficult, two people have called up and complained about blah blah, we're going to change it based on those two people. You know, things like that. It's not based on research in that sense. So I feel as though that has been really significant for us, to really look at this, that's a very different way. I don't think we've done anything like that before. (PS21)

The policy actor interprets academic statistical information and data as more valuable in directing action than a standard quantitative survey. I suggest this process of associating or linking technical knowledge to academia and to statistical discourse was a way of giving that knowledge authority in a making of evidence. I build on this making of evidence in the next chapter.

The quantification of evidence and knowledge extended to the need to quantify and measure behaviour. In the section above the ability to quantify behaviour shaped the selection of projects that used randomised control trials. However, some policy actors interpreted all types of behaviour as quantifiable. One public servant talked about how they “like to draw a bell curve” (PS20) demonstrating the normal distribution of the public and how they can be nudged, dividing the population up into how their behaviour can be changed. I also heard policy actors talk about the bell curve of compliance. At each end were people (and behaviours) that were highly compliant or non-complaint, and in the middle section were the behaviours government seeks to shift. In the

excerpt below the public servant argued that all behaviour could be placed on a bell curve. He said,

Any behaviour you look at, whether it's dropping a piece of litter or paying a fine, through to committing a violent sexual assault, there are always going to be some people who will do the thing, some people who will not do the thing, and some people in the middle. We are never going to stop all littering completely for all time, there's always going to be at least one person who will throw, who will definitely do it, and there are a lot of people who will never throw a piece of litter in their lawns. There are a lot of people in the middle, who go, "If the opportunity's right and no one's looking, I'll just quietly throw it."

Where we can have the most value is with that middle cohort, where there's large relative to the other, the shoulders. Ideally, a classic, normal Gaussian distribution, if that's what your behaviour looks like, we can assume based on, we can shift that middle cohort. These people are not committed either way, so we can push them gently on where they are there. (PS10)

The public servant's comparison of littering to sexual assault suggests the quantification of behaviour may be flattening out the voices, complexity and impact of behaviour. When all behaviour is interpreted as measurable and must be measured in behavioural insights processes, complex problems can be placed onto statistical curves. The privileging of technical knowledge over experiential knowledge appears to have resulted in violent sexual assault being approached in the same way as littering or paying a fine. The pattern I observed of policy actors emphasising

abstracted, technical knowledge therefore impacts policy making and potentially how policy actors perceive people's behaviours. I explore this further in later chapters, and how such privileging of knowledges changes the orientation of policy actors to the policy terrain.

5.6 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have explored how policy actors interpret behavioural insights as an instrumental application of knowledge, using evidence to solve policy problems. I identified a pattern in behavioural insights projects involving two key phases, an 'understand phase' and a 'test phase'. Technical knowledge is drawn on and local knowledge is produced in an 'understand phase' where policy actors seek to make sense of the issue. Technical knowledge is produced through trials in a 'test phase'. In this chapter I have identified the tension between local and technical knowledge. While academics have argued that local and technical knowledge blur or overlap (Lindblom and Cohen 1979; Jasanoff 1987; Yanow 2000), in behavioural insights processes these are compartmentalised. Local knowledge is perceived as an important way of improving interventions, in the 'understand phase' but struggles to fit into an instrumental approach to policy making that privileges technical knowledge. When local knowledge plays a role, it is technified and utilised by policy actors in developing policy. I suggest the importance and relative superiority of the different knowledges shapes how and which processes are used, for example in the projects selected by behavioural insights teams. In the next chapter I build on this analysis to explore how local and technical knowledge in behavioural insights is labelled as evidence by policy actors. I argue that while policy actors interpret behavioural insights as instrumental, its use and framing is also political.

6 CHAPTER 6: THE POLITICAL USE OF KNOWLEDGE IN BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS

6.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I examine how behavioural insights embodies not only an instrumental but also a political use of knowledge. The political use of knowledge has been described as using evidence selectively to support a political position (Cairney 2019). This definition of the political use of knowledge suggests evidence can be used to support a politician's stance or in a political party's agenda setting. However, knowledge may also be used symbolically to signify the legitimacy of a decision (Radaelli 1995) or to raise the visibility of a policy position as it is 'evidence-based' (Newman 2017). The use of knowledge in policy has also been described as political as it is a means of claiming authority (Daviter 2015).

This chapter interrogates policy actors' political use of knowledge. It reveals their frustrations with policy making for political reasons are associated with the use and promotion of behavioural insights. I argue policy actors are labelling and making evidence through assertions of behavioural insights academic foundations, and examine the contestations over evidence throughout the chapter. Policy actors use craft and normative knowledge to advocate for and show the value of behavioural insights, which may attach more importance to either using local or technical knowledge. Policy actors also protect their model of behavioural insights and challenge other models by arguing they do not align with public sector values. The growing and protecting of behavioural insights provides policy actors with resources

and policy authority, revealing a complicated connection between interpretation and action.

6.2 FRUSTRATIONS WITH POLITICAL POLICY MAKING

Evidence-based policy making is often criticised for perpetuating a myth of evidence that directs decisions in policy entirely removed from politics (Head 2016). This suggests policy actors supportive of evidence-based policy making, which I examined in the previous chapter, should also interpret policy making as separate from politics. However, in my research policy actors often reflected on the way in which the political context directed policy making. Policy actors commented that political support influenced their prioritising of research projects, including whether projects had ministerial support, or how their priorities may change if ministers' projects required immediate attention. In the interviews, I heard frustration from policy actors with policy decisions they perceived were made politically. For example, one public servant commented "often some decisions are political, and you can't get around that" (PS6) indicating that some public servants would prefer to "get around" political decision making. Another public servant commented that "sometimes evidence helps. Sometimes governments do things despite evidence" (PS11) and went on to say that in some instances politicians want evidence to support the development of a new policy. I found support for behavioural insights, as an evidence-based approach, was a response to policy actors' perceptions that decision making was too often political, rather than coming from inexperience or a naivety of how policy decisions are made.

Policy actors explained that they sometimes try and build evidence so that it can support decision making processes when needed. One public servant (PS4) commented that in practice, political decisions are made and then evidence from

behavioural insights is retrospectively applied. They argued it would be “better” if they already have the evidence and understanding of the problem before the decision was made. In another interview, a public servant (PS1) argued that having evidence is “good for policy” as it stops administrations spending money on projects and interventions that are ineffective or that might negatively impact the public. These frustrations about political decision making expressed by policy actors drive them to seek an alternative, or idealised version, of policy making presented by behavioural insights. This echoes arguments in the academic literature that evidence-based policy making is a response to decisions that are ideologically based (Parsons 2002; Pearce and Raman 2014). Evidence-based policy making emerged in the late 1990s as a response to politically driven policy making (Boaz et al. 2019) and in my research the advocacy of behavioural insights, which I discuss in this chapter, is also a response to policy making perceived to be shaped by political interests. By using knowledge produced through behavioural insights, policy actors see themselves as countering the political use of evidence (A. S. Haynes et al. 2011).

Policy actors interpreted evidence from behavioural insights as an important check on ensuring policy making is not ‘just’ based on political whim. Rather when political decisions are made, they are made on the evidence available. Rhodes (2016b, 642) has argued an important craft skill of public servants is to “act as a counterweight to partisan interests and arguments”. In this way, policy actors are deploying craft knowledge in their support for evidence-based policy making. Policy actors perceive when using behavioural insights, they are applying an instrumental, value-free approach which produces inarguable evidence that cannot be easily dismissed on political grounds. While this reflects the framing of evidence-based policy making as ideologically neutral and value free (Parsons 2002), policy actors use values and

normative knowledge to support the use of evidence from behavioural insights in policy making. Policy actor's use of "good for policy" and "better" in the section above reflects the normative knowledge used to claim how policy should be made. Normative knowledge is the context dependent knowledge of what should be done (Petersén and Olsson 2015). Normative knowledge draws on ethics and values, and the deliberations surrounding them, to push for change (Sanford Schram 2012, 17). I consider the political use of normative and craft knowledge further in the remainder of this chapter.

The political use of knowledge is sometimes framed as the use of evidence to legitimise political interests (Daviter 2015). Here policy actors do not use evidence to support political interests. However, the use of knowledge to counter political decision making is political, as it emerges from and furthers the values of, evidence-based policy making and behavioural insights which they wish to see upheld in the public service. By advocating for behavioural insights as an evidence-based approach they also grow their resources and authority. It is a "political act" as this knowledge and evidence is used to further their position (Boaz and Davies 2019, 193). Their position here is that evidence should be used to shape policy decisions. In the next section I discuss how evidence is made and I continue this analysis throughout the chapter as I consider how knowledge is used in behavioural insights to contest and select evidence.

6.3 POLICY ACTORS 'MAKING' OF EVIDENCE IN A POLITICAL PROCESS

In policy, the label 'evidence' provides knowledge with legitimacy (Fraser and Davis 2019). Institutions and organisations have developed standards and hierarchies that provide guidance on what constitutes 'good' evidence which are typically based on methodological considerations (Nutley, Davies, and Hughes 2019). The labelling of

evidence is political as it can influence policy choice and resources – it provides authority in policy. In the previous chapter I argued behavioural insights is seen as an evidence-based approach as it draws on academic research and produces knowledge through scientific and technical methods. This knowledge is ‘made’ into evidence as policy actors reinforce its academic and scientific roots. For example, the data produced through randomised control trials could be interpreted as data, numbers or percentages. However, this data is labelled as objective, inarguable evidence as it is produced through methods framed as academic and scientific. The framing of behavioural insights as academic has provided legitimacy to the approach in part because of the scientific methods it has become associated with. This policy maker commented,

It gives weight to something to say it's got science behind it, and to say it's got behavioural science behind it (AC7)

This comment illustrates how the academic knowledge which behavioural insights draws on is fundamental to its interpretation as an evidence-based approach which should be taken seriously in policy making. Drawing attention to the academic foundations of behavioural insights is a way of making evidence, as in the following excerpt, where the policy actor is discussing the authors of the book *Nudge*. He said,

It was very influential, Cass and Richard are extremely credible. I think it was important that they had both come from, they were drawing heavily on psychology but weren't from that background. For me that was quite important. I think if it had been written by a psychologist it might have been slightly

dismissed as, you know, not appropriate for their field. But when you've got it written by a top lawyer and legal scholar and regulator and a top economist who comes from the Chicago school and who is seen as a pretty powerful economist... (PS9)

This policy actor is discussing the legitimacy the authors, as academics, bought to nudge and the way it was accepted into the public service. The authors of *Nudge* are credited with the success of the approach in government, with Richard Thaler becoming an advisor to the Cameron administration in the UK, and Cass Sunstein to the Obama administration in the United States (Kuehnhanss 2018). In the excerpt above where the policy actor describes the authors there is a making, or labelling, of the work they produce as 'evidence'. For instance, rather than talk about them as a lawyer and economist, he talks about them as "extremely credible" and goes on to say they are a "top lawyer" and "powerful economist". By emphasising the academic foundations of behavioural insights, and expertise of these academics, the policy actor labels this knowledge as evidence.

The same policy actor recalled how the name behavioural insights was carefully considered by public servants in the UK government. Policy actors did not want to be confined to the discipline of economics, so they excluded the term behavioural economics, and they rejected the label of behavioural sciences as it may have been associated with experimentation. Further, they did not want to be known as the "BS" team. This policy actor's account reveals the careful framing of behavioural insights. Strassheim (2017, 239) argues that the selection and validation of evidence and its framing are "the result of a carefully orchestrated interplay of scientific as well as

political aspects.”. Here we see the “careful orchestration” in the labelling of the behavioural insights approach. This making of evidence in behavioural insights highlights the importance of ‘evidence’ and the recognition of actors who take steps to enhance the legitimacy of behavioural insights knowledge and findings. Put another way, policy actors’ belief in the importance of evidence shapes the way they present behavioural insights to myself as the interviewer and also to the wider public service.

The labelling of evidence however, does not simply lead to that information been easily accepted as evidence in the public service. In my interviews I heard contestations over labels and privileging of evidence, including the status of randomised control trials. As Rhodes (2016a) argues, evidence is labelled or made, but it is also unmade through political struggles. Actors construct and deconstruct evidence as a way to stake authority and further their own interests (Jasanoff 1987). In the context of behavioural insights, this contestation occurs over local and technical knowledge. In the previous chapter I explored the tension between local and technical knowledge in behavioural insights processes where policy actors who supported the use of local knowledge struggled to fit this into an instrumental application of behavioural insights. This tension is also a making or unmaking of evidence, as policy actors seek to elevate the use of local knowledge and discredit approaches to behavioural insights that privilege randomised control trials. In the sections below I consider how policy actors use craft and normative knowledge to question and contest evidence. The use of knowledge in this way is political, as policy actors emphasise information that aligns with their interests and discredit information which does not (Stevens 2007). Fleming and Rhodes (2018, 20) claim “all knowledge... is political in that it involves conflicting definitions of problems, the selection of data by stakeholders, and the use of that data in both an organisational and a larger political game”. In the next section I consider

how the selection and advocacy of behavioural insights knowledge is political as it is tied to policy actors' values, and is a claim for policy authority which furthers what they perceive is a better way to develop policy.

6.4 USING KNOWLEDGE TO GROW THE BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS APPROACH

The interpretation of behavioural insights as an evidence-based approach and idealised version of policy is associated with activities to advocate for its use. In this section I first examine these activities before turning to how knowledge is used in these activities to sustain and grow behavioural insights.

In my research, I spoke to policy actors who had attended presentations on behavioural insights which included case studies about behavioural insights projects. Some of these presentations depicted simple, easily understood bar charts and graphs presented as evidence on the effectiveness of randomised control trials. The results of these trials were linked to the amount of revenue generated through the behavioural insights intervention. That is, the data showing the percentage point differences between the intervention and control was translated into money saved or obtained and used to show the value of the approach. This value was seen as particularly impactful when the results of the trials were extrapolated to the population and the reported figure includes the expected change a behavioural insights intervention would make should it be implemented. As one public servant noted,

I mean if you can say, "We changed this letter and seven and a half thousand more women went and got their Pap smear every year," that's really ... I find that really compelling. I'd find that compelling as a taxpayer and I find that compelling in my work. (PS18)

This linking of randomised control trials to revenue and outcomes, which is then showcased in presentations, reflects the ‘making’ of evidence. I also heard of these case studies used at conferences and on government websites. In one interview an academic consultant discussed a project they had worked on which was developed into a case study to demonstrate the value of behavioural insights. However, the consultant claimed the case study had applied behavioural insights principles retrospectively, and these principles were never used in the project (AC5). This account demonstrates the contestations of evidence in behavioural insights. A case study written as evidence of the value of behavioural insights by a government team is challenged by this academic consultant who asserts this is not legitimate behavioural insights knowledge production. It may be that underpinning this conflict was a contest over who had the authority in behavioural insights, government or academic consultants. Contesting this evidence was therefore a way of the policy actors claiming a stake in the knowledge production and their role in the process (Jasanoff 1987).

For many of the policy actors I spoke to the case studies and presentations were compelling. An academic consultant (AC8) in the same team commented that nudge and behavioural insights teams had been marketed “really well” and they produced cases studies that showed the impact of behavioural insights, which made the approach “really appealing”. Lepenies and Malecka (2020) have suggested that behavioural insights practitioners are required to persuade others of the value of behavioural insights because of the criticism of the approach, which I discussed in my context chapter. In my research, there were policy actors who had never heard any

criticisms of behavioural insights. I suggest policy actors engaged in these advocacy activities as they believed it was important to ensure the department understood the value of the approach, rather than to defend the approach from criticism.

These advocacy activities policy actors engage in suggests that, although behavioural insights aligns with evidence-based policy making, which has been criticised for framing evidence as “speaking for itself” (Pawson 2002), policy actors tacitly perceive that behavioural insights cannot speak for itself. One policy actor spoke about how part of her role was to persuade others of the value of behavioural insights. She explained that 80% of her time is spent on her work, and 20% of her time is “PR for behavioural insights” (PS18). This public servant went on to describe some of these PR activities such as placing flyers in their staff kitchen and holding workshops for her department on how to apply behavioural insights techniques to letters and communication. Policy actors also used newsletters, open days and internal intranets to communicate about behavioural insights, sometimes framed as “how behavioural insights could make a difference” (PS15). Other advocacy activities included workshops, presentations, training events and masterclasses. For example, a workshop may explain what behavioural insights is, emphasising its evidence-based approach, use case studies to demonstrate its effectiveness and then work through examples of behavioural insights and how the principles could be used in practice.

These advocacy activities reflect an assumption from policy actors that they needed to show the value of the approach. One public servant commented that you need to ‘sell the benefits’ of ‘the pitch’ (PS3). Other policy actors spoke of advertising what they do to build the value proposition for the approach. Indeed, marketing terms were used when discussing how the approach was demonstrated to other teams and

departments areas. One academic consultant said “So you know, we’ll put up our bar chart and ... its really easy to digest and got a lot of saleability.” (AC2). These promotional activities, and the reference to “saleability” illustrate the political use of knowledge as policy actors seek to grow the use of behavioural insights and their policy authority. Although the uses of knowledges were not the focus, there is some support for this finding from other research. Feitsma (2020) positions behavioural insights experts as knowledge brokers. Drawing on the theories of rationalism and incrementalism, he argues that policy makers ‘sell’ behavioural insights to support their desire for rational and scientific policy making.

Policy actors did seem driven to grow the approach. This is observed in the PR and advertising done to legitimise behavioural insights, as well as specific references from policy actors on applying behavioural insights more widely. For example, some policy actors spoke about applying behavioural insights to different issues, such as more complex problems, rather than what they saw as more narrow domains of compliance. Others spoke of applying behavioural insights to other areas, such as education, or applying behavioural insights in the policy development stage, rather than when designing interventions. For example, one policy actor suggested that it would be helpful to look “further upstream in that policy cycle” (PS8). These areas of application echo those of behavioural insights teams and academic literature who argue that behavioural insights should be applied more widely (Sanders, Snijders, and Hallsworth 2018; Ewert and Loer 2021).

The advocacy activities may also be shaped by what some policy actors perceived of as a general ‘ignorance’ or ‘apathy’ towards behavioural insights beyond the central teams and their partners. One policy actor explained that the partners they worked

with were often already convinced of the benefits of behavioural insights. Beyond those partners however, he perceived that public servants were not always aware of, what he saw as, the benefits of behavioural insights (PS20). Another public servant also perceived scepticism of the approach in the broader public service. They commented,

I think the majority of people still really don't know what it's about, which also creates suspicion and, "What are they doing? And then what are they doing to us, that we don't know about? (PS19)

One public servant also commented that their project-based, consulting approach I discussed in the previous chapter can hinder the expansion of behavioural insights. A project may be completed by a centralised behavioural insights team, but they expressed concern that there is then limited knowledge about the approach shared with the wider team and department. Thus groundswell support for the approach is often absent and unlikely to generate any ongoing enthusiasm for behavioural insights. One public servant who did not work in a behavioural insights team illustrated this pattern in her comment below,

I've seen on a number of occasions a person or a team getting the okay to explore some more innovative ways of doing things in design thinking and behavioural insights but they're generally not integrated into business as usual. They're just little projects that happen and someone reports on it and a paper goes up to someone and everyone gives everyone a pat on the back but they're not actually integrated. (PS3)

Thus policy actors' interpretation of a larger bureaucracy that are unaware or sceptical of behavioural insights may drive them to undertake these advocacy activities for the policy authority to apply behavioural insights.

Policy actors used their craft knowledge in determining the format of these presentations. Participants explained to me that they developed a series of five minute presentations which they delivered to the broader departments. Another spoke of keeping presentations to an hour, as this was all the public servants would be able to attend. One academic consultant talked about a series of workshops they held which were "Dos and don'ts, tips and tricks to every day audiences, so not using the academic jargon, and people love it." (AC7). These examples show how policy makers use their craft knowledge of the public administration environment to grow the use of behavioural insights.

Craft knowledge is the knowledge of policy and political processes deployed by policy actors in their job roles and is derived from policy experience. Craft knowledge may encompass negotiation, values of the public service, understanding of the administrative environment and using experience and institutional memory to challenge politicians and make recommendations (Rhodes 2016b). Craft skills are those "learned on the job" (Rhodes 2016b, 642). In my research it was the policy actors who had served in the public service for longer who talked most confidently about what was needed to persuade others of the value of behavioural insights.

One public servant (PS14) who worked in a behavioural insights team described the presentations she gave to the wider department. In the presentations she explained

that the foundations of economic policy are based on the idea that people act rationally and then introduced the idea of irrationality. She used real life examples of the way people are irrational, such as that many people in the department had likely signed up to their default superannuation plan. She said,

And I sort of pointed out like, you know, I'm sure you know, everyone here has taken into account all of the information about superannuation and carefully considered that and what it means for them, and they've made a decision. No one here would be on the sort of default plan we got signed up to when we joined the department, you know. And sort of introduced it with all the ways that we don't act rationally, and gave them lots of examples of that. (PS14)

This excerpt demonstrates how the public servant knew to use a relatable example of the departments superannuation plan, which the audience would be familiar with, to describe the principles of irrationality and defaults. The public servant also explained how she removed information on statistics and trials from the presentations because of the limited statistical expertise in the department. I also heard from other policy actors that behavioural insights advocates had the ability to translate complex phenomenon and psychological principles into simple examples that resonated in the public service.

I note a contradiction here in the uses of scientific and statistical knowledge, mirroring my previous observation that behavioural insights teams support both the top of the hierarchies of evidence (randomised control trials), and the bottom (expertise). I have argued that behavioural insights is presented as a scientific approach that emphasises

the use of statistics, and privileges statistical data over numbers and surveys. However, here we see policy actors strip their advocacy activities of this very information that is a basis of their legitimacy. This seems a contradiction, but may be related to policy actors wishing to retain their expertise in behavioural insights, a phenomenon that has been observed in other research (see Strassheim, Jung, and Korinek 2015). That is, behavioural insights advocates maintain their authority in producing knowledge through randomised control trials by ensuring that the statistical methods in these trials are 'black boxed' and must be simplified for other public servants. In this way they demonstrate the value of using the approach, but also retain their own authority to produce this knowledge. This also supports the assertion from Lepenies and Malecka (2020) that behavioural insights actors seek political and epistemic authority by producing knowledge in behavioural insights, through trials and experimentation, but then use this knowledge to sustain the behavioural insights approach.

The presentation of simple charts and relatable examples supports Strassheim et al.'s (2015) assertion that behavioural insights appeals in part because it is easily understood. My research finds behavioural insights does not 'present itself' in easily understood graphs, but rather policy actors involved in the advocacy of behavioural insights use their craft knowledge to develop presentations and promotions that appeal to their department or area. These easily understood charts are a feature of behavioural insights projects observed, for example, in projects in the Netherlands (Feitsma 2020). It may be that this presentation of behavioural insights projects has been shared across countries and teams as it is perceived to be useful in demonstrating the value of the approach. However, the way the policy actors speak of the absence of local statistical expertise and the context they operate in, suggests that

here actors are also deploying craft knowledge to persuade other actors of the benefits of behavioural insights.

The role of knowledge to persuade has been explored in the academic literature. Weiss and Gruber (1984) have examined the examined how knowledge is used for policy control in areas of unclear boundaries in government institutional arrangements. In their research they found policy actors used different strategies to achieve this control, including using knowledge to persuade other actors of the value of an approach. The policy actors understood what types of information will appeal, and will be considered credible, how to present that information, and how to get that information to the different teams or targets (J. A. Weiss and Gruber 1984, 299). In the context of behavioural insights, policy actors use their craft knowledge to encourage public servants to pay attention to the results of projects. They link behavioural insights results to revenue and cost-effectiveness measures, emphasising how behavioural insights aligns with public sector values of effectiveness and cost-effectiveness (Head 2008). This linking of results to revenue made or saved may also reflect the context which behavioural insights arose in. The UK's Behavioural Insights Team had an initial mandate to return ten times their cost (Sanders, Snijders, and Hallsworth 2018). The first dedicated behavioural insights teams in Australia, the NSW team, was also established in partnership with the UK team (Behavioural Insights Unit (NSW) 2014) and continued this pattern of linking outcomes to revenue. Thus in Australia the translation of results and data into revenue and returns may be a historical legacy, interpreted as part of the process of behavioural insights. However, this linking of results to revenue also likely reflects a public service that is focussed on outcomes and efficiency and approaches that support this focus appeal to public servants. One policy actor explained that in the current environment they have

pressure from the Treasury to demonstrate that the money they are given delivers outcomes for their clients (PS17). Another public servant reflected on how the government is becoming more outcomes orientated (PS2). Thus here policy actors' craft knowledge of the context shapes their advocacy and activities.

While the interpretation that public servants must be persuaded of the value of behavioural insights was sometimes tacit, as noted other policy actors spoke explicitly about the need to show the value of behavioural insights. By demonstrating the value of behavioural insights, teams could then sustain and grow the use of behavioural insights and the authority to apply behavioural insights in government. This was reflected in the selection of projects. The way projects were selected differed between teams. As described in the previous chapter, some behavioural insights teams would act almost as a consultancy, where different teams would ask for assistance and resources for a project and behavioural insights teams would manage and deliver the behavioural insights project. Other behavioural insights teams would provide advice or partner with teams to deliver projects. The way policy actors spoke about their projects suggested that it was often the behavioural insights teams that were choosing which projects to work on, and indeed some policy actors recounted how behavioural insights team were 'flooded' with projects when they were established. In another interview a policy actor (PS11) commented that this selection of projects considered ministerial priorities as well as the technical requirements of running randomised control trials, but that they also had an obligation to prove the value of behavioural insights and would prefer to run trials that were successful. Successful trials that were then implemented more widely would demonstrate the value of the approach. I asked if this was how they selected trials and her response was that it would be a risk to talk about the selection of projects in that way. Later in the interview however, she returned

to this theme, talking about how they need projects to use as evidence to show that the approach “works” and can influence government interventions.

One policy actor commented they would try to persuade partners to undertake projects if they believed it would have large financial impacts that they could then use to demonstrate the impact of behavioural insights. Another public servant, at the end of her interview, commented that,

we need to make sure the foundation is really strong. Because I don't want it to turn into another wanky word thing that everyone scoffs at in a few years' time because they haven't seen the outcome. I think that we really ... certainly my team ... we need to get stronger outcomes on books. (PS13)

Throughout this interview the public servant referenced different fads in the public service. She drew comparisons between behavioural insights and other approaches, such as design thinking, arguing that behavioural insights was different and not a fad. However, in this comment she notes that her team need to “get stronger outcomes on the books” in order for behavioural insights not to be viewed as a fad, or a “wanky word”. This demonstrates the importance attached by the public servant to securing successful projects which can show the value of behavioural insights as an approach in the public service.

Pearce and Raman (2014) suggest that the selection of project using randomised control trials is political, as projects that conflict with the dominant political ideology are unlikely to be considered. My research demonstrates that the selection of randomised

control trials is also political as projects are chosen to grow behavioural insights. The growth of behavioural insights and demand for its use would ostensibly provide additional resources for teams and increased policy authority. Benson (1975), in his work on interorganisational networks, argued that organisational participants work to secure resources for that organisation, which take the form of money and authority. He explains,

Authority refers to the legitimation of activities, the right and responsibility to carry out programs of a certain kind, dealing with a broad problem area or focus.' (Benson 1975, 232).

In seeking policy authority, policy actors claim legitimacy to apply behavioural insights more widely, and as I discuss in the next chapter, frame policy problems. Policy actors may not interpret their actions as deliberate moves for authority and resources, rather authority and resources are needed to grow the use of behavioural insights. Arguably however, politicians who are often criticised for using knowledge politically would also not interpret their use of evidence as deliberate act to grow their authority and resources, but also are guided by their values and beliefs. This raises question on the role of motivation in policy actors' use of knowledge. Policy actors' interpretations of the importance of making policy decisions on evidence shapes their behaviour in advocating for behavioural insights. This move for policy authority does not seem to be driven by a desire for policy control or personal gain, but for the authority to grow an approach they interpret as a better way of developing policy, and achieving better policy outcomes.

Here however I identify a tension where policy actors on the one hand support policy decision making driven by evidence, which they interpret as objective and scientific and not driven by political ideology, but on the other hand are also making decisions on projects based on their potential success in moves for policy authority. This tension is seen in the section above where the policy maker recognises that they ‘should’ not be selecting projects based on their possible success. I explore these tensions in interpretations further in the section below, however I now examine in more detail how policy actors use knowledge to grow behavioural insights.

6.5 POLICY ACTORS USE KNOWLEDGE TO GROW *THEIR* MODEL OF BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS

When policy actors spoke of engaging in activities to grow the use of behavioural insights, they used craft and normative knowledge to emphasise the importance and value of *their* particular model or approach to behavioural insights. In this chapter I use the term ‘model’ as a heuristic in my analysis to refer to the different emphasis placed on local or technical knowledge in behavioural insights. As described in the previous chapter, most policy actors did not present or define models of behavioural insights. Most actors instead described behavioural insights projects as a process of first doing research to understand the problem before testing the intervention. However, in the interviews, some policy actors attached more importance to the value of local knowledge in what I have conceptualised as the ‘understand phase’. Other actors placed more emphasis on the role of randomised control trials and the production of technical knowledge through trials in the ‘test phase’.

Policy actors used craft and normative knowledge in their emphasis or advocacy of local or technical knowledge. For example, one public servant commented that their

team's approach to developing policy and interventions is different to how others are doing it saying,

I think that what we're doing, to sound totally up ourselves, should be how policy works, how policy should be developed. I don't think it is how policy is developed. (PS18)

The public servant went on to discuss how other policy making approaches were reactive whereas their approach first seeks to understand the problem before developing a policy. She delineated between their approach and other approaches in their department by drawing attention to, what she framed as, extensive client and community consultation. She explained that they always include community perspectives in the development of projects which other teams do not. The policy actor uses normative knowledge to advocate for their model of behavioural insights, claiming this is how policy "should work" and how it "should be" developed. In this way she is claiming authority for the use of behavioural insights that always includes local knowledge. Another policy actor in the same team also emphasised the importance of local knowledge in behavioural insights. In the previous chapter I explored how she struggled to fit local knowledge into the technical processes of behavioural insights. Throughout her interview the policy actor used normative knowledge to claim that their approach using local knowledge was valuable. She described their model as noble, arguing that it included voices that otherwise would not be heard in policy making, saying "They should have a voice and a choice (PS16)".

This policy actor also intertwined craft knowledge with this local knowledge. In the interview, she explained that local voices were valuable to their senior executive. She presented team projects to their executive board, which she said was unusual but was something she “personally fought hard” for. In these presentations to the executive, she used lots of direct quotes from clients and went on to explain that her senior executive generally did not get exposure to their clients on the ground. Here the policy actor uses her craft knowledge to produce evidence that the senior executive will pay attention to, as they are disconnected from the experiences of their clients. Further, she presents that local knowledge in a format that appeals by using direct quotes. So, while she interprets local knowledge as ethically important for her values and the values of the public service, it is also a way of giving their team and their behavioural insights approach visibility. This policy actor’s background was in researching local experiences, and this was also the expertise that she brought to the team. Her team had also run behavioural insights projects that used randomised control trials, but this was challenging because of ethical sensitivities from their department on ‘experimenting’ on policy targets and the practical considerations of capability and data systems such as difficulty accessing data because of privacy issues. Thus the model of behavioural insights that the policy actor promoted was shaped by interpretations of the importance of including local knowledge as aligning with public sector values of giving communities a voice. However, it was also shaped by the expertise and political administrative context of the team.

Policy actors also advocated for behavioural insights models that emphasised technical knowledge. In the previous chapter, I examined how randomised control trials added to perceptions of behavioural insights as an evidence-based approach. However, as examined above, these trials also provide a vehicle for behavioural

insights to show its value to the public service through the linking of results to costs and thus the values of efficiency and effectiveness. In one interview, a policy actor spoke of the importance of randomised control trials, as they were able to say “with authority” that the intervention using behavioural insights had made a difference. While this reinforces the technical interpretation of data produced through randomised control trials, it also highlights how actors used their craft knowledge of the importance of effectiveness in the public sector to grow the use of behavioural insights. In another interview a policy actor explained,

I think we have reason to believe that what we're doing is genuinely adding value, because we are drawing on an established body of science to prove things, and then I think the fact that we're adding to it as we go also benefits, because we can then also show it's adding value, so the association with running rigorous trials has allowed us to demonstrate beyond any kind of reasonable doubt the techniques are generally value-adding. It can work, and can deliver a lot more benefit than any cost. These relatively small changes we're doing, we can deliver disproportionately large benefits, it might end up being one or two percentage points or three or four percentage points here and there, but that's whole percentage points the government's struggled to find movement on... (PS10)

In this interview, the policy actor argues that randomised control trials provide evidence of the effectiveness of behavioural insights. The policy actor labels the technical knowledge produced by randomised control trials as “beyond any reasonable doubt” framing the knowledge as scientific, rigorous and inarguable.

However, the policy actor also links this technical knowledge to revenue benefits for government, as described in the section above. The policy actor deploys craft knowledge in presenting a model of behavioural insights that emphasises the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of behavioural insights.

The persuasion of this policy actor was also connected to the administrative context. I also heard that their funding arrangements required their team to demonstrate a return on its investment. Thus the emphasis on technical knowledge was driven by available expertise and their administrative context, much like the policy actor who emphasised local knowledge. The context and resources of teams is associated with whether the model of behavioural insights placed more importance on the 'test phase' and technical knowledge or the 'understand phase' and local knowledge.

In the previous chapter I used an analytical model to illustrate the different phases and knowledges used in the instrumental approach to behavioural insights. In that model I argued that policy actors interpreted behavioural insights as drawing on knowledge which was used in the 'understand phase'. I build on that model (in blue) to describe how policy actors use political knowledge (in green) in Figure 6-1 below.

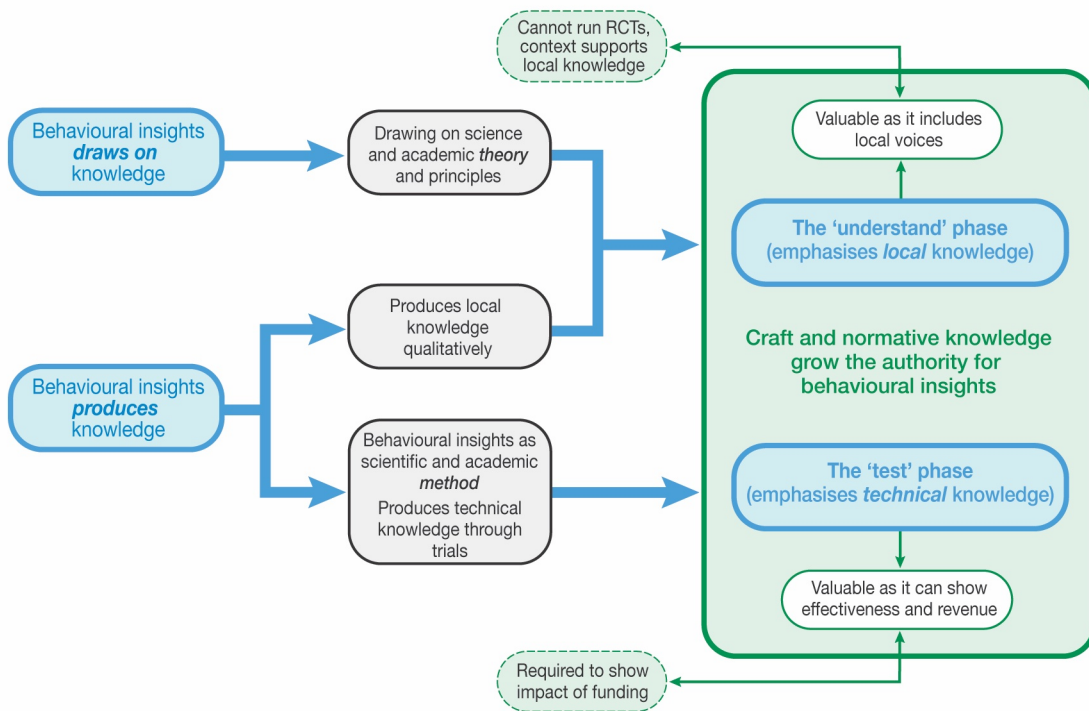


Figure 6-1

Craft and normative knowledge form the background or are interwoven with local and technical knowledge in activities designed to grow behavioural insights. Policy actors promote models of behavioural insights that emphasise the use of technical knowledge as it is interpreted as aligning with public sector values of effectiveness and cost-effectiveness. Other policy actors interpret that government should include local knowledge in their decision making and advocate for behavioural insights projects that emphasise the 'understand phase'. However, these advocacy activities are shaped by the policy actor's context and the actions they can take to sustain or grow their policy authority. In contexts where teams are required to demonstrate their financial impact, policy actors select randomised control trials as these can be used to show the revenue generated by the behavioural insights project. In contexts where

local knowledge is more valuable, policy actors attach more importance to models of behavioural insights that emphasise the ‘understand phase’.

Policy actors use craft knowledge of the administrative context to select which type of knowledge they should use. Other research has also suggested that knowledges can be woven together, with craft knowledge used to select which types of knowledge are used as evidence (Fleming and Rhodes 2018). This weaving may start with political knowledge as “a political decision is the essential prerequisite for solving any problem” (Fleming and Rhodes 2018, 19). In my research, craft knowledge of the administrative environment is used to select the model that will be more valuable in growing policy authority. In the following section I consider how knowledge is used not only to grow, but also protect their model of behavioural insights.

6.6 USING KNOWLEDGE TO PROTECT THEIR BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS APPROACH

In the research I identified a critical puzzle where policy actors were keen to promote the use of behavioural insights and engaged in activities that demonstrated the value of the approach. Yet at the same time, these policy actors also criticised and challenged other policy actors’ use of behavioural insights. In this section I suggest these criticisms and the tensions I observed are contestations over evidence in behavioural insights to protect policy authority.

Policy actor’s advocacy of behavioural insights included claims that their model was more valuable than others. By differentiating their approach, and implicitly or explicitly challenging other approaches, they protect their model and team from competition for policy authority. Policy actors compared other teams approaches with their own, in some instances directly referring to “tension” (PS16) or “competitiveness” (PS2)

between different teams and models of behavioural insights. Another public servant compared their team with another saying,

they've got the big shiny office with the yummy view and it's all secret to get in there and that lot ... 'Because we did go and meet them once and we really did feel like the poor cousins. They did this big shiny PowerPoint presentation and they're all there. Like the team is huge, compared to ours and we like, had this piece of paper...yes, we feel inadequate, thank you. (PS19)

This comment, where the public servant contrasts their team with another behavioural insights teams, and the implicit criticism that the other team were intending to intimidate them, reflects the tension or competitiveness in the behavioural insights terrain. I heard this tension in the first interview I did with a public servant, although organisational differences were not something I was asking about in the research. The public servant first differentiated her model of behavioural insights, saying her team is trying to “provide a different lens on behavioural insights” (PS1). She talks about the importance of local knowledge produced through their ethnographic work, arguing “it’s that equity question”. The public servant claims government values, of equity, should dictate a wider use of evidence including local knowledge. This implicitly discredits other approaches as they are not working in this way. This public servant’s differentiation between teams and their use of knowledge and evidence ran through the conversation. At the end of the interview she spoke directly about the tension between different teams inside and outside of government, saying “people are kind of tussling over their particular way of doing it....you've got the turf wars happening.” I note that while the policy actor uses normative knowledge to claim the importance of

local knowledge, their team member also told me that often do not have the resources available to undertake large scale technical projects such as randomised control trials, again illustrating the importance of context on the selection of knowledge.

Throughout the interviews I heard this contestation over the knowledge government should be using. This section of conversation below occurred with a public servant in response to whether she saw any difference between behavioural insights, behavioural economics and nudge. The public servant said,

...to call it behavioural economics I think overstates the econometric side, and we're not just about numbers. We're ultimately, here, about improving the client experience. So we need to be ... You know, like our name needs to reflect the client experience, and behavioural insights is moving away from just a numbers focus, data-driven. Numbers are important, but they're only such a small part. You know, it's so interesting, when we have worked with Team X, they are heavily interested in the data, and RCT only. And like I said, we don't ... That's frankly a luxury. We don't have a choice of being able to walk away from important work that has to be done...They're more focussed on, "Okay, well let's make sure we do the analysis and results at the end." Well, you can ... That's the end. The most important thing is actually getting the activity right.

(PS15)

This excerpt illustrates the way in which types of knowledge are interwoven, used to make knowledge claims and critique others. Initially the public servant distances herself and her model of behavioural insights from an association with numbers and

quantification. She emphasises the importance of local knowledge and the client experience saying their aim is “improving the client experience”. She then differentiates their model from Team X. Team X was another team in government which I have labelled thusly to preserve anonymity and confidentiality. She argues that Team X are “heavily interested in the data, and RCT only” contrasting their focus on technical and scientific knowledge with her model of behavioural insights which incorporates local knowledge. She argues that doing a randomised control trials is a “luxury” and they “don’t have a choice of being able to walk away from important work”, implying that Team X is not engaging in valuable work by only recognising evidence produced through randomised control trials. In the interview she went on to talk about how other teams may focus on whether or not they can do a randomised control trial, however her team is always focussed on the client’s experience and getting the best outcome for the government. She uses normative knowledge about what government should be doing, that is focussing on clients and the client experience, to challenge other productions of evidence.

Other policy actors also challenged models of behavioural insights that focussed on technical knowledge. When I asked one public servant (PS14) about the role of trials in behavioural insights, she responded that she would prefer to be able to do more randomised control trials as they are the gold standard, reflecting the privileging of the method I identified in the previous chapter. However, she went on to explain that their projects do not have the sample sizes that such trials require in order to be able to show statistical significance. Adhering to strict randomisation of sites for a project would be too expensive and time consuming. She said that they had tried to work with Team X but were unable to because of Team X’s commitment to randomised control trials. Again, this comparison to other models of behavioural insights was raised

without prompting from me. She claimed her team would instead consider these practicalities and do other types of trials rather than producing no evidence. In this interview she used normative knowledge to contest the privileging of randomised control trials, claiming some evidence is better than no evidence, to justify and label her knowledge production as evidence.

Other research has found that policy actors may use methodological criticisms of research approaches to ‘unmake’ evidence (Boaz et al. 2019). This can include challenging the validity and design of studies or the expertise of those who are running randomised control trials (Dunlop 2016). I did not hear such criticisms of the validity of randomised control trials, perhaps because the policy actors did not have the statistical expertise to be able to question the scientific methodologies. In my research, rather than drawing on technical factors to criticise randomised control trials, policy actors argued it was antithetical to the values of the public service to prioritise trials over public good. While the framing of knowledge produced through randomised control trials as inarguable can remove space for discussion of values (Dunlop 2016), here policy actors drew on normative knowledge to contest their privileged status.

Many of the criticisms I heard came from actors who advocated for models of behavioural insights that incorporated local knowledge. Policy actors attaching more importance to the ‘test phase’ did not use craft and normative knowledge to criticise other models in the same way. I suggest this is because policy actors using the ‘test phase’ and producing data through trials are already in a privileged position in the evidence-based policy making paradigm, sitting on top of hierarchies of evidence (Nutley, Davies, and Hughes 2019). Thus only policy actors who struggle to fit local knowledge into behavioural insights processes that privilege technical knowledge use

knowledge to protect their approach. These contestations reflect how policy actors can use knowledge politically to compete for authority over policy choices and processes (Daviter 2015). Here policy actors use craft and normative knowledge to contest the value of different types of evidence. By criticising other models of behavioural insights they are also elevating and protecting their approach to behavioural insights from other approaches which may be competing for resources and authority.

These political contestations are conflicts over what evidence counts in public policy or, as Parsons argues, “whose evidence, gets what influence, when and how” (Parsons 2002, 14). The making and unmaking of evidence, and contestations over the types of knowledge or evidence that should be used to make decisions in policy are debates over values in public policy. The use of political knowledge may be lamented by some (Souchon and Diamantopoulos 1994, 67) while others suggest there is nothing unethical about the political use of knowledge (Weiss 1979; Davies 2012). The knowledge conflicts I have heard in this thesis may also be productive. They are a way of challenging status quos and evidence hierarchies. The contestations I have described are ways of introducing different voices into policy and, as contests over which problems count in public policy.

6.6.1 Using craft knowledge with technical knowledge

As noted in Chapter 4, I have not analysed or examined interpretations by teams or networks of actors, as my focus is policy actors’ interpretations and use of knowledge. However, in the interviews I observed a pattern, or a series of conflicts, over knowledge and evidence between academic actors and public servants in government.

Public servants argued that the technical knowledge produced by academics must be accessed through the craft knowledge of public servants to ensure it is fit for government use. In the excerpt below the public servant criticised academic actors for prioritising publishing in academic journals. She was discussing a behavioural insights project where they had partnered with academic consultants, saying,

Clearly with results and publishing information, researchers are interested in the academic journals. Whereas we're more interested in, I suppose, we have to be conscious of how the department looks and things, and the importance of the public, and I suppose ultimately, no matter what our professions are, we're public servants. So that's something that we have to be conscious of all the time. (PS21)

In the interview she contrasts academic actors' prioritisation of publishing with the practice of government where they are concerned with the importance of the public and public good. Throughout the interviews, I saw this boundary drawn between academic knowledge and government practice. Public servants discussed how reports written by academics would have to be rewritten for the government audience. Another public servant (PS3) commented that a workshop given by academics was not useful for her day to day role. She suggested that it attended more to theories of policy making that could not be applied in practice drawing parallels to the policy cycle (Althaus, Bridgman, and Davis 2012) and saying that such theories do not reflect her work. She went on to comment that the behavioural insights course also used examples when you have a "clean slate" whereas she works with existing regulation and policy that cannot be changed in these ways.

Public servants did not criticise academic *knowledge* as this knowledge provides behavioural insights with authority and legitimacy, and thus it is counterproductive to criticise the foundations that are used to grow the approach. Rather they draw on craft knowledge to criticise academic *actors*, in this way claiming authority for public servants in behavioural insights processes. The policy actors deliberately deploy their craft knowledge to make claims on the importance of their role as public servants in behavioural insights processes.

Similarly, academic consultants also protected their authority in behavioural insights. One academic who was working on a project with a government agency commented,

One of the issues with experimentation and bureaucracies...is that many policy makers and bureaucrats think they're doing experiments when they're not. They don't really understand or take seriously what a researcher would really require as an experiment. Just trying something new, and even collecting the data on it, how much revenue was collected or something, they think that's an experiment and it's not. (AC3)

Here the academic argues that public servants do not have the technical knowledge to undertake 'real' experiments. This academic went on to discuss their expertise and particularly how they can undertake randomised control trials which are the gold standard. As another example, in the previous chapter I included an example where an academic consultant discussed workshops they ran with government actors (AC7). She said they demonstrate behavioural insights using 'tips and tricks' and a list of what to do and what not to do, stripped of academic jargon. This actor engages in the

promotion of behavioural insights, simplifying the technical knowledge so that it appeals to public actors. However, she concludes her description of this workshop by questioning whether public servants really understand the principles of behavioural insights. In this example, the policy actor protects their authority in behavioural insights by suggesting that the technical knowledge resides with academic actors. Claiming the authority to apply the technical knowledge in behavioural insights would presumably lead to further resources for the academic through partnering on projects with government.

Craft knowledge was also interwoven with technical knowledge. In this excerpt below a public servant discussed how team members were able to help explain the technical data they were analysing. He said,

the fact that all of those people had been working in the area for a very long time, and they've actually got a very valuable understanding of the data and the data issues that we were encountering. So we've definitely had challenges where data was incomplete or it kept changing in the database. Our partners were able to say, oh, that's because you know, the database updates every time someone puts through a new detail. (PS20)

Another public servant commented that they draw on the knowledge of local teams in co-designing solutions. They said,

We also put a strong design on co-design in our solutions. We'll bring the [behavioural insights], you guys bring the understanding of the system, and together we'll jointly design the solution. (PS10)

These policy actors suggested that local teams typically had a good understanding of the policy problem they were trying to address or the local systems that they needed to work with. These actors typically worked with a 'test phase', using randomised control trials to test interventions. However, other policy actors perceived that craft knowledge interfered with the application of technical knowledge. One policy actor that privileged statistics above surveys that I examined in the previous chapter said,

in our team, there's a lot of resistance to trying things that are different. And I feel as though that's, like if you put behavioural insights on a spectrum, let's say, like we're testing these things, we're not even anywhere near that. So even things just as simple as, I don't know, how about this year, instead of doing what we've done for the last four years with this mail out of this brochure, how about we try a brochure that actually addresses this? No no no, there's no evidence, we can't, we've done it this way, this is how we do it. I manage this, blah, I do it this way. So there's a lot of that. (PS21)

This policy actor was involved in a project that used a randomised control trial to test different brochures and pamphlets. There was little consideration or reflection that perhaps craft knowledge has been demonstrated in their approach to developing the

letters they had used over the years. Nor did this policy actor question whether resistance to new interventions may come from their knowledge base or practice. This interview supported Weiss et al.'s (2008) claim that evidence-based approaches can override craft knowledge of projects and programs. Further, the privileging of technical knowledge which I examined in the previous chapter, and the struggle to fit local knowledge, leaves little room for the role of craft knowledge in behavioural insights. Craft knowledge acknowledges the political as it may encompass political nous, moral principles, an understanding of ministerial priorities, and the skill to negotiate administrative environments. The absence of an acknowledgement of the role of craft knowledge in deploying behavioural insights may be why it presents as an instrumental approach, applying evidence to solve policy problems. While I have identified the use of craft knowledge in behavioural insights, most policy actors did not recognise and, perhaps consequently, value it. Policy actors did not often interpret or make sense of craft knowledge, although it shaped their actions. I now turn to this relationship between action and interpretation, building on my discussion of intentionality I began in Chapter 4.

6.7 THE POLITICS OF COMPETING BELIEFS?

In this chapter, I have examined how the interpretation of behavioural insights as an idealised version of policy making leads actors to undertake activities and use and contest evidence. Policy actors use normative and craft knowledge to claim that behavioural insights should be used as it incorporates local knowledges and people's voices, and is an effective and cost-effective use of government resources. This political use of knowledge grows the resources and authority for behavioural insights. In this section I consider what the findings in this chapter reflect on interpretive policy analysis as a methodology. I have intentionally included this section in this chapter on

the political use of knowledge to reflect on how the beliefs of public servants are shaped by the political context of the government and how this also shapes their actions. Further, in this section I consider how policy actors negotiate beliefs and select evidence. The selection of evidence is political because it is a way of controlling and legitimating policy (Parsons 2002). The use of knowledge to advocate for behavioural insights is political because it makes claims on authority, but also because it relates to which questions and which problems are worthy of attention and resources.

Interpretive policy analysis suggest people act on their beliefs and preferences (Bevir and Rhodes 2002) and attaches importance to the role of situated agents. The concept of situated agency highlights the role of policy actors in the use of knowledge. Situated agents are shaped but not constrained by their background, history, geography and context. In interpretive policy analysis, when a situated actor is faced with a dilemma, broadly defined as an idea which is not consistent with their web of beliefs or 'traditions', they may alter their traditions (Bevir and Rhodes 2002). However, this reinforces the role of intentionality in interpretive approaches. It also suggests it is only when policy actors are faced with new ideas that are different to their belief systems that they may change their belief system. However, it may be that people hold different and even conflicting beliefs but it is only when action is required that these are surfaced and require negotiation to align action and belief. This is suggested in the tensions between local and technical knowledge I have examined in my two empirical chapters thus far.

In my research, I have examined how policy actors who believe in the importance of local knowledge will advocate for the expansion of their model of behavioural insights.

They also criticise (which in itself is an act) other models of behavioural insights that emphasise technical knowledge. However, I have also explored how these actions also seem to be shaped by the resources available to them and the context they operate in. These actors who support local knowledge are also often unable to undertake randomised control trials or they have senior support for local knowledge. Similarly, policy actors advocate for models of behavioural insights that privilege randomised controls as they believe they uphold public sector values of effectiveness. These actors also operate in a context where their funding requires them to demonstrate their financial impact on government revenue, which can be achieved through comparing trial results.

It may be a coincidence that those advocating for technical knowledge came from teams that required them to show the monetary impact of their projects, whereas those advocating for local knowledge worked in contexts with limited capacity to run randomised control trials. Indeed, it may be that policy actors are drawn to work in areas that support their beliefs. However, the tensions I have observed between local and technical knowledge, and in the models of behavioural insights, suggests that instead policy actors use their situated agency and draw on different sets of beliefs when considering actions. By actions I refer to both the behavioural insights model they advocate for and the processes of behavioural insights they engage in.

The psychological theory of cognitive dissonance is helpful in understanding this process (Festinger 1957). In this theory people have 'cognitions' which are a piece of knowledge, and includes people's own knowledge of their beliefs or actions (Cooper 2007, 6). Cognitions can conflict, and this conflict causes people discomfort, so people are driven to reduce this tension or inconsistency. For example, if a person acts in a

way that conflicts with their beliefs, this causes conflict. As it is difficult to change behaviour that has already occurred, people are driven to change or alter their beliefs in some way to make them consistent with their behaviour. A classic example is the introduction of car seatbelts for drivers. Research found that the introduction of legislation which forced drivers to wear a seatbelt led to more favourable attitudes to seatbelt use, as people altered their beliefs to make them consistent with their behaviour (Fhanér and Hane 1979).

In my research public servants may hold competing cognitions, or interpretations, about behavioural insights, which may conflict with their actions. For instance, a policy actor may believe that the inclusion of local knowledge is important in policy making, but also operate in a political environment which they interpret as requiring their team to demonstrate the value of behavioural insights through trials. These beliefs may be surfaced when the policy actor is required to work on projects with trials. The privileging of the technical knowledge they produce, required because of the context, then conflicts with the perceived importance of local knowledge. These actions then force a renegotiation of their beliefs. When these beliefs are in tension, but actions must be taken, belief systems may change as attitudes, or beliefs, are more amenable to change than behaviours (Cooper 2007). This may be why in my research I saw beliefs about knowledge consistent with the behaviours that have been shaped by the policy context. Those who are required to show the impact of the work of their team through randomised control trials have come to believe or understand the importance of technical knowledge. Those who do not have the capacity or capability to run randomised control trials turn to local knowledge and have come to attach importance to the inclusion of these voices in policy. The tensions I heard are the renegotiations of these beliefs, as they reconcile beliefs with actions.

My research also suggests that policy actors do not necessarily hold one coherent web of beliefs which shapes their actions, but can hold multiple and, importantly, competing sets of beliefs. Policy actors may perceive the importance of both local and technical knowledge, but it is only when action is required that these are surfaced and require attention. Building on the example above, policy actors may perceive the importance of both local and technical knowledge, but it is only when action is required that these beliefs are seen as conflicting and require negotiation. The beliefs or 'cognitions' are conflicting, because the evidence-based paradigm which dominates behavioural insights practice privileges technical knowledge, and evidence hierarchies create a system or context where some knowledge is perceived as more legitimate than others. In this context, technical knowledge is privileged at the expense of local knowledge, and for local knowledge to be legitimate, technical knowledge must be criticised, as I have identified in this chapter. Thus when an actor undertakes a randomised control trial, beliefs about the values of both local and technical knowledge are in tension and must be renegotiated.

Other examples of this conflict in beliefs are demonstrated in the selection of projects, where the tension surfaced between the need to show the value of behavioural insights projects by only selecting those that were successful, and the importance of a rational approach to the selection process based on technical and political requirements, aligning with a public service ethos of objectivity.

As situated agents, policy actors must negotiate these potentially conflicting beliefs and contexts when taking action, such as what is needed in a political environment to gain policy authority and what types of knowledge are important in policy making. In this process they are selecting which evidence is advocated for and emphasised in

behavioural insights. When negotiating actions and decisions, policy actors negotiate the values they wish to uphold in the public service, and the importance of different knowledges in policy making, intertwining their craft knowledge, which includes their political acumen to understand the context and what is required to grow policy authority.

My thesis thus contributes two overlapping questions, or implications for interpretive policy analysis. Firstly, as discussed above, policy actors may hold multiple and conflicting beliefs that do not surface until an action is taken. How public servants negotiate these beliefs can reveal something more of intentionality and the role of situated agency in the interplay between action and belief. Secondly, behavioural insights theory disrupts expectations of intentionality between belief and action. Policy actors may act because they are influenced by biases and heuristics without thought or considerations and not because they are guided by their beliefs. This reinforces the importance of context or the policy environment in analysis. For example, policy actors may be unknowingly influenced by social norming, or the behaviours of their peers when taking actions. Researchers may need to consider what the 'default' actions are in policy processes. Policy analysts then, should also pay attention to the role of justifications and rationalisations when actors seek to reconstruct the meanings to actions. These rationalisations may be useful in understanding the webs of beliefs that actors hold about expected and legitimate behaviour, but it may not be why they acted. Both implications however, suggest interpretive policy analysis should attend to the tensions and conflicts in sense-making, which I explore further in my final empirical chapter on the conceptual use of knowledge.

6.8 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have explored how policy actors interpret behavioural insights as an idealised version of policy making that should be used to influence decisions and temper policy they see as made at the whims of politicians. Policy actors use craft and normative knowledge to grow behavioural insights, granting them resources and authority. While supporting the growth of behavioural insights, they also seek to contest or unmake evidence, protecting their model or approach. I suggest the use of craft and normative knowledge, intertwined with local and technical knowledge, is a political use of knowledge. This is not only because it counters political decision making, but because the growing of these models aligns with policy actors' values and furthers their authority. These actions embody a political use of knowledge. In the next chapter I build on this analysis of the instrumental and political use of knowledge to examine how the selections and contestations over evidence in behavioural insights influence or are a conceptual use of knowledge.

7 CHAPTER 7: CONCEPTUAL USE OF KNOWLEDGE

7.1 INTRODUCTION

In this chapter I explore how knowledge in behavioural insights may be *influencing* policy actors. The academic literature has divided knowledge utilisation between the *use* of knowledge and the *influence* of knowledge (Boaz and Nutley 2019). *Use* signifies a direct application of knowledge to policy, such as the instrumental application of concrete knowledge to solve policy problems or the political use of knowledge to support a policy stance which I have analysed in the previous two chapters. In comparison to *use*, the *influence* of knowledge on policy is more “diffuse and indirect” (Radaelli 1995, 161). This form of knowledge gradually influences policy actors’ interpretations of policy areas and policy problems in public policy (Weiss et al. 2005). It is slow, subtle and difficult to identify. The length of time for knowledge to influence policy in this way, perhaps longer than ten years (Weiss 1993), presents a challenge in analysis for this chapter. The first behavioural insights unit was established in Australia in 2012, and although interest in the approach began earlier in Australian government (Afif et al. 2018), many teams emerged only as I began my fieldwork. Therefore, the longer-term influence of knowledge from behavioural insights on policy actors is more difficult to examine than the more direct instrumental and political uses of knowledge. This chapter is therefore best conceived of as a meta-analysis, as compared to the previous two empirical chapters. By analysing the contradictions and tensions within interviews, I suggest that behavioural insights knowledge is re-orientating policy actors to the policy terrain. The patterns in the data that emerge from this chapter’s analysis suggest how knowledge used in behavioural insights influences policy actors’ interpretation of policy making and policy problems.

I assert that the instrumental, political and conceptual knowledge in behavioural insights are complimentary and interwoven.

7.2 ALL POLICY PROBLEMS ARE BEHAVIOURAL

In this section I examine how the emphasis on understanding the problem is reorienting policy actors' understandings of policy problems as behavioural problems. First though I consider how this 'understand phase' is associated with the use of knowledge to uncover the 'real' problems.

In my Chapter 5 I explored how in the 'understand phase' of behavioural insights processes policy actors would use academic literature to diagnose the behavioural biases in the policy problem, or use local knowledge to understand the problem from the perspective of service users of the community. This knowledge then informed the design of a policy or intervention which may be tested through a randomised control trial. Other policy actors also talked about the importance of the 'understand phase' as policy problems first had to be understood before solutions could be developed. This perhaps reflects the frameworks used by behavioural insights teams, such as the team in NSW whose approach begins by 'defining the problem' (Behavioural Insights Unit (NSW) 2014, 3), in their Understand, Build and Test framework. However, policy actors explained that their work in defining the problem often meant uncovering the 'real' problem. As one public servant explained,

What's the outcome that we're trying to achieve? The intervention you design will be quite different, depending on what the actual problem is... I still don't think it's commonplace for people to think, "Hey, what kind of problem are we actually dealing with here?" I think the shift to outcomes approach is really accelerating that kind of mindset, "What are we actually trying to do? Who are

we working with? What's the outcome we're trying to achieve and whose behaviour matters to achieve that outcome (PS2)

Throughout the interview the public servant emphasised her role in investigating the 'real' problem and the 'actual' outcome. In the excerpt above, the public servant draws a distinction between the way her team approaches projects and others, claiming it is not "commonplace" for public servants to question the problem. She perceives that her team has the authority to question the policy problem, explaining they ask "what kind of problem are we actually dealing with". Through the use of behavioural insights knowledge, they are able to uncover the 'real' problem.

This public servant went on to describe a situation where an intervention was rolled out to reduce school truancy. The truancy was supposed to be caused by parental apathy of their children attending school, but in their research to understand the behaviour causing the truancy, they uncovered the 'real problem' was that parents did not realise how much school their children were missing. These comments on behavioural insights as uncovering the 'real' problem reflect recent academic literature advocating for an expanded role for behavioural insights in policy. For example, one academic article reviewing behavioural insights suggested that "we should pursue a more 'diagnostic' approach that may help solve actual problems." (Hansen 2018, 193). Other empirical research has also found that academics and practitioners working in behavioural insights perceive the potential for behavioural insights to be used to discern the real problem (Ewert 2020).

Other policy actors also spoke of uncovering and then solving the ‘real’ problem using the evidence drawn on and produced through behavioural insights. For example, in this interview the policy actor is talking about the role of behavioural insights in developing policy. He said,

I tend to think about policy as being the broad statement of objectives and how the governments going to organise itself to implement them. And that's a really great place to have attention to what's the actual problem we're dealing with here, who's involved, how are their behaviours contributing to it, what are the drivers of those behaviour and so on. (PS4)

This public servant first talks about policy as the “broad statement of objectives” and then suggests this is where the “actual problem”, and the behaviour contributing to the problem, can be uncovered. This exalted status of policy actors as discerners of ‘real’ problems seems to suggest they have been granted the policy authority considered in the previous chapter to challenge and interpret policy problems. As I go on to discuss below, this approach to policy problems is intertwined with how policy problems are understood as driven by behaviour, which is shaping understandings of the policy terrain.

Behavioural insights, as I have argued, aligns with the evidence-based policy making paradigm. This paradigm focusses on the problem to be solved, adopting a positivist rational approach to policy making where a problem exists that can be solved with more knowledge or evidence (Bacchi 2012). This approach does not question the problem, which is taken as “given, uncontroversial, and easy to recognise” (Bacchi

2012, 158). However, I identify policy actors using behavioural insights knowledge to challenge the given problem and discern the 'real' problem'. Behavioural insights while supporting evidence-based policy and presenting as an instrumental application of knowledge, seemingly contradictorily, is also used to problematise the policy problem and to question the taken for granted status. Policy actors though also describe how research and evidence can be used to uncover the real or actual problem and this use of evidence is still fairly instrumental – policy actors do not use evidence and knowledge to investigate, for instance, the framing of issues or issues of power in agenda setting. This suggests that policy actors instead perceive a distinct or privileged role for behavioural insights knowledge as able to discern real policy problems.

I also note here that policy actors were much more likely to speak of policy problems than they were policy goals. This is the dominant discourse in policymaking where policy actors “think of everyday policymaking in terms of problems and solutions” (Turnbull 2006, 4). The focus on policy problems is associated with an instrumental, linear approach to problem solving, where knowledge is used to solve a given problem, but also illustrates the intertwining of the political and the instrumental use of knowledge. Policy actors use knowledge politically to advocate for the instrumental use of knowledge presented by behavioural insights. Policy actors are then vested with the policy authority to use evidence to challenge and uncover the real problem. This use of evidence has an exalted status, as through behavioural insights knowledge the real problems can be revealed. This then reinforces behavioural insights as an approach that works, further growing the actor's policy authority and supporting this political use of knowledge. I explore the interdependency of knowledge uses in the final section of this chapter below.

My research suggests that the very act of approaching a policy problem from the standpoint or lens of behaviour leads to a particular framing of the policy problem and solution. I have selected the two excerpts from public servants above as they demonstrate both how behavioural insights knowledge can discover the ‘real’ problem, but also the assumption that this problem will be one of behaviour. In the first excerpt, the public servant asks "What kind of problem are we actually dealing with here...Who are we working with? What's the outcome we're trying to achieve and whose behaviour matters to achieve that outcome" (PS2). The policy actor implies that the policy problem and the outcomes will be caused and solved by people’s behaviours. The public servant connects the policy problem to behavioural biases and the behavioural outcome they are trying to change. In the second excerpt above the public servant’s comments “what’s the actual problem we’re dealing with here, who’s involved, how are their behaviours contributing to it, what are the drivers of those behaviour and so on” (PS4) again illustrates that the actual problem is assumed to be one of behaviour. They ask not *if*, but *how*, behaviours are contributing to these problems.

Policy actors using behavioural insights, and particularly the ‘understand phase’, approach projects with an assumption that the problem will be driven by or in some way involve people’s behaviour. If a “behavioural lens”, as policy actors sometimes referred to, is applied to the policy problem, then all problems become problems of behaviour. This aligns with previous research which found support for the suggestion that “every policy issue could be examined through a behavioural lens” (Ewert 2020, 346). Academic literature also sometimes reflects the concept of policy as changing behaviour. For example, a recent academic article noted that “the attempt to change the behaviour of individuals is inherent to any public policy” (Tosun and Hörisch 2019, 258).

In the interviews, policy actors asserted that all government policy is about influencing and changing behaviour. For example, one public servant commented that “Every single thing that government does, it's about getting a particular behaviour as a result” (PS13). I did hear from some actors that behavioural insights can be used in all policy areas. In the interviews, I asked policy actors about some of the challenges of using behavioural insights and where they felt the approach could or could not be applied. Some policy actors responded that they could not think of an area where behavioural insights could not be applied in some way. One academic consultant recalled how a nudge to reduce mental illness in children had been used in refugee camps in war zones. While this was a more extreme example, it did reflect a pattern I heard from some policy actors interpreting that nudge and behavioural insights could be used in any policy area.

The idea of ‘behavioural overreach’ encapsulates some of these arguments. Behavioural overreach suggests that all policy interventions are seen as behavioural. There is a ‘behavioural overreach’ where regulatory interventions, such as reducing the amount of sugar in manufactured products, are framed as behavioural interventions (Lepenies, Mackay, and Quigley 2018). My research suggests this behavioural overreach may apply to the interpretations of policy problems as well as policy interventions. That is, it is not only interventions, or solutions, to policy problems that are interpreted as changing behaviour, but all policy is caused by problems of people’s behaviour.

The concept of policy as changing behaviour may have already been established before the popularity of behavioural insights. Indeed, behavioural insights may have achieved its popularity because it fit easily into pre-existing conceptions of policy

problems. However, comments such as the one below suggest that behavioural insights have also had some influence on the understanding of policy problems. When talking about first understanding the problem, this policy actor commented that,

We really get to quite a granular level, and I think that takes people on a journey because all of a sudden they start to see something entirely different from we've got to find a solution to this problem. All of a sudden they are starting to talk about things in terms of the individual behaviours that might make up that broader issue. (PS8)

The policy actor talks about how in the behavioural insights process they consider the different individual behaviours that comprise policy problems. The comment that they take people on a journey may be a 'reorienting' as policy actors come to understanding their policy problems as a problem of behaviour. This suggests behavioural insights knowledge is influencing understandings of policy problems, that is, it is "bringing new information, ideas and perspectives into the arenas in which decisions are made" (Weiss 1999, 471).

I note here that I have also argued that behavioural insights knowledge could be interpreted as the instrumental application of knowledge in Weiss' (1979) knowledge-driven model. Here new knowledge or research, such as those about biases and heuristics and the role of people's behaviour, creates new opportunities for policy. Behavioural insights knowledge as both instrumental and conceptual questions the distinctive of the categories of instrumental, political and conceptual, and illustrates how they may overlap or intertwine. These categories are helpful in identifying how

research on biases and heuristics has created opportunities to apply behavioural insights knowledge instrumentally to interventions and projects. This has then led to behavioural insights knowledge reorienting policy actors to interpret that the purpose of policy is to influence people's behaviour.

This framing of all policy as behavioural could also be part of an astute and deliberate political strategy to grow the use of behavioural insights. By deliberately framing all policy problems as behavioural, policy actors can then offer behavioural insights as a 'solution' which consequently grows the approach, granting the actors authority and resources. While the focus of their paper is development policy, the work of Nustad and Sending (2000) is of relevance here. They have examined the role of causal knowledge in policy, which I discuss further below. Causal knowledge is produced as causal explanations, where X causes Y, and therefore Y can be predicted to happen due to X (Fay 1975). Causal knowledge is intimately related to science and technical knowledge. Nustad and Sending (2000) argue that development agencies define problems using this causal knowledge. Development problems are framed as caused by particular variables that can then be solved using the toolkit of the agency. In the context of behavioural insights, framing policy problems as problems of behaviour, or as caused by a particular bias or heuristic in their behaviour, leads to solving these problems with a behavioural insights intervention. Requiring problems to be solved with behavioural insights would then grow the policy authority.

I did observe a pattern where behavioural insights knowledge is associated with an interpretation that all policy is behavioural. However, I suggest that the interpretation of policy as behavioural is not a political strategy designed to grow the approach, but rather a reorientation of policy actors' understanding of policy. Deliberately framing

policy problems as behavioural to promote behavioural insights suggests there would be clear narrative about policy as behaviour, or a consistent message from policy actors about the role of behaviour in public policy. However, I did not observe a coherent narrative on the benefits of behavioural insights that might relate to a political marketing of the approach.

Further, policy actors, particularly those involved in advocacy of the approach, were keen to temper enthusiasm for nudge. One policy actor commented that they may have oversold behavioural insights. This policy actor and others who were promoted behavioural insights were keen to emphasise that nudge was just one tool in the 'toolkit' of government. They argued that some teams might come to them assuming that behavioural insights would be able to fix their problems 'as if by magic', but that it was not a silver bullet that could solve all policy problems. Such comments came from policy actors including the one above (PS4) that assumed that policy problems are driven by behaviour. Overselling nudge leaves the approach open to criticism (Lepenies, Mackay, and Quigley 2018) and this may be why policy actors talked about the limitations of the approach. However, I suggest that this highlights a conflict in policy actors. While they interpret that behavioural insights has limitations, the behavioural insights knowledge is shaping their understandings of policy problems as behavioural. It is behavioural insights knowledge influencing, or conceptually shaping understandings of policy problems.

Drawing on my argument in the previous chapter that policy actors may hold competing beliefs, I suggest the contradictions I discuss in this section are the negotiations of two conflicting sets of beliefs. On the one hand, policy actors hold beliefs about the many approaches to policy making and the role of structure in policy

problems. On the other hand, behavioural insights knowledge is shaping interpretations, or conceptually influencing, policy as behavioural. The contradictions I heard in interviews reflect this ongoing process of negotiation as this knowledge shapes their understanding of policy.

For example, one academic consultant (AC2) worked in an area where they applied behavioural insights to government projects. He began the interview by talking about how some policy areas are about applying behavioural tools, but some areas require structural change to address policy problems. However, later in the interview he argued all policy “boiled down” to changing behaviour. This is not to expect that people are consistent in interviews (Brinkmann, 2013). In the interviews, some actors reflected that they were only considering some of these issues for the first time, and the contradictions may be policy actors working through these ideas in the interviews. However, the contradictions do not suggest a coherent political narrative to frame all policy as behavioural, so that behavioural insights can be offered as a policy solution. Rather I suggest they illustrate how behavioural insights knowledge may be in conflict with other beliefs, or knowledge held about policy.

In another interview the policy actor, who worked in a team that applied a more technical use of knowledge, was talking about the use of behavioural insights in policy areas. They said,

There has to be a behavioural problem in the first place, and a lot of what government does is about trying to change people's behaviour, but by no means all that. We also have a role in providing information and providing public services, which aren't necessarily intended to change behaviours. Provision of healthcare and secondary education isn't necessarily to change behaviour, it's

a service we provide, and this stuff about making work better and more efficient. Some of us, we can come in and help a little with it, if there are behavioural aspects of it. But that's quite a lot of what government does, to inform, or educate, or to surprise, so it's rather intuitive to behaviour. We have to have a meaningful benefit where there is a strong behavioural component...

Now, most areas of government policy have at least some behavioural aspect. Say, well, "We provide the service of education," and it's just a service provision. Of course, it's fun to get kids to turn up to school. That's a behaviour school, so we can maybe work on that. There are usually items in most of the systems where there are already behavioural aspects to them, but that really has to our focal point. I don't think there are any types of behaviour that are not in theory amenable to some kind of behavioural science-based approach.

(PS10)

This excerpt neatly illustrates the contradictions I heard in the interviews. The public servant starts by claiming "a lot of what government does is about trying to change people's behaviour, but by no means all that". He goes on discuss information provision and "providing public service", which he suggests are not about changing behaviour. These are areas that behavioural insights can be applied, "if there are behavioural aspects to it". However, later in the interview the public servant argues that most systems have behavioural aspects, and most are "amenable" to behavioural insights. These contradictions suggest a reorienting of policy actors to interpreting policy and policy problems. While policy actors interpret policy making as broader than influencing behaviour, and perceive that it would open the approach to criticism to

directly claim all policy problems can be solved using behavioural insights, this interpretation of policy as behavioural seems to be creeping into the “background of ideas concepts and information that increases their understanding of the policy terrain” (Weiss 1995, 146).

Academics have recently proposed the concept of a behavioural state. The behavioural state focusses on people and their behaviour (Feitsma 2018). In the behavioural state, government actors are driven less by the use of regulations in policy than in previous policy history, and driven instead by increasingly targeted behaviour change interventions (Leong and Howlett 2020). This chapter suggests that it may be knowledge in behavioural insights that is shaping the activities associated with the behavioural state. While I observed this reorientating most often with policy actors who advocated for the ‘understand phase’, policy actors who advocated for the ‘test phase’ model of behavioural insights also seemed to interpret policy this way, as in the excerpt above. In the next section I consider how the ‘test phase’ is associated with policy actors also interpreting policy problems as measurable behaviour.

7.3 ALL POLICY PROBLEMS ARE MEASURABLE AND SIMPLE

In this section I consider how technical knowledge in behavioural insights, which is framed as evidence of ‘what works’ in a political use of knowledge, is influencing understandings of policy.

As I have examined in the previous chapters, policy actors used methods that were framed as scientific to produce technical knowledge in the ‘test phase’ of behavioural insights. Policy actors emphasised the role of randomised control trials in this phase as the gold standard of evidence and other research has found that randomised control trials are prioritised in behavioural insights projects as public servants are

committed to evidence-based approaches (Ball and Head 2021). My research extends Ball and Head's work by finding that projects are also selected because it has political support or because of its potential success to grow policy authority, as well as whether the project fulfilled technical requirements needed for a randomised control trial. The selection of these projects demonstrates the interplay between instrumental uses of knowledge, using randomised control trials to support evidence-based policy, and the political uses of knowledge, as the evidence produced through methods framed as scientific and incontestable are used politically to grow policy authority. The use and advocacy of trials also seems to be shaping understandings of policy as simple and measurable.

In the previous chapters I have examined in detail how behavioural insights is associated with trials, and the use of randomised control trials as the gold standard, and therefore here I provide only brief examples of this preference for evidence produced through trials. The focus on trials, and the need to measure outcomes, shapes which projects were selected for behavioural insights projects. One academic consultant reflected this emphasis on quantification, commenting,

It's not surprising that many of the first experiments have been in tax and fines and penalties because for a start it seems like a clear, measurable indicator of compliance, is where the more people pay or less, so you can measure outcomes. (AC3)

The prioritisation of randomised control trials is illustrated in one project I examined which aimed to improve the uptake of a health practice. This project was a partnership

between a consultancy, a centralised behavioural insights team and a department, and I spoke to policy actors from each area. The project was selected and given resources from a behavioural insights fund. When I asked the department actors why their project was selected, they suggested it was because they had a health register and the health practice was easy to measure. Thus it could be easily ascertained with a simple tick or cross if the achieved outcome was completed and whether the intervention was successful. Through the behavioural insights project, their department received additional resources, such as external expertise to undertake the trial and additional people to work with their team on the day to day management of the project. The policy actor also spoke about how the project had given their team and policy area visibility in the wider department through case studies on the web sites and through internal talks and presentations. In this case, the availability and format of the health data directed which project was selected for these resources and visibility.

Partnering with behavioural insights teams does seem to provide projects with resources and visibility. As noted in the previous chapter, some behavioural insights teams operate on a consultancy model, where they take projects and complete them on behalf of the department or agency team (project team). Other behavioural insights teams offer their advice and expertise on policy projects which are undertaken by the project team. In both cases, the project team receive additional resources for their work. Policy actors in behavioural insights noted that they were sometimes viewed as additional resources for other teams, and policy actors who had worked with behavioural insights teams commented that through the project they were able to access these resources. In this selection process it was often the projects with measurable outcomes that were developed into case studies, presented in workshops

and seminars and received funding and resources. Ball (2021) found some government teams would engage external consultants to investigate the research problem, completing those aspects of a project that would help ‘understand’ the problem. They would then approach the behavioural insights team to run a randomised control trial on the intervention. Ball (2021, 12) concludes that the departments who were partnering with the behavioural insights team “clearly appreciated that building a deeper understanding of citizen behaviour was important to the development of a ‘BI’ project”.

I suggest such processes also support the visibility and privileging of behavioural insights projects that emphasise randomised control trials and quantitative measures and outputs. That is, projects that have measurable outcomes are awarded additional resources and visibility. To be selected for these resources, project teams may be presenting or framing their work in terms of quantitative measures and outcomes. Policy actors then improve chances of their work been selected as appropriate for a randomised control trial and accessing the expertise, resources and visibility that comes from these behavioural insights projects. For example, as described above when a public servant was commenting on their selection of projects they start with what data is available for the project (PS13). This policy actor went on to talk about how they were committed to evidence-based policy. This reflects not only an intertwining of evidence and quantitative outcomes that I examine previously, but also how the prioritising of data and testing leads to a selection of projects with problems that can be measured. Policy problems that have measurable behavioural outcomes are thus more visible to policy actors, receive more attention and resources. In this way the focus on randomised control trials is reshaping understandings of policy problems to problems that are measurable and have clear, identifiable testable

outcomes. The selection of projects with problems to be measured reproduces the perceived importance of these policy problems and solutions, leading to increased visibility and influence of this knowledge on policy actors. The importance of technical knowledge is then also reinforced or reproduced.

Evidence-based policy making has been criticised for privileging quantitative data (Wesselink, Colebatch, and Pearce 2014) and devaluing local knowledge produced or held within communities, including those within aboriginal populations (Maddison 2012). Framing evidence as technical ignores the inequality in the making of evidence and which voices are heard. In my research, I heard of a project with the Indigenous population which sought to increase the health practices discussed above. The research focussed on improving compliance with the health practice through changing the way information is presented to the population to encourage the health behaviour. This would then be tested through a randomised control trial to measure the impact of the changes. When discussing the project, policy actors spoke of the opportunity that the project presented, as there was room to improve the outcome measures and these outcomes measures could be easily captured. They commented that there were “easy opportunities to measure and improve, and insert these behavioural strategies” (PS21). This policy actor noted that the area of Indigenous health was a priority, and self-determination was important across government. Self-determination has been described as “the fundamental right of people to shape their own lives” (Fletcher 1994, xi). This seems at odds with some of the criticisms of nudge and behavioural insights, discussed in Chapter 2 that the approach impinges on people’s agency and autonomy. Another policy actor, when speaking about the trial with Indigenous populations, commented that the trial “is going to be about Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders, we don’t know our facts or how to even start that one yet” (AC6). The funding that

supported the projects was specifically to run randomised control trial. Thus the technical opportunity to run a randomised control trial, in an area that was a departmental priority with easily defined measures, shaped the project. It may be the context of an interview on behavioural insights did not provide the actors with the scope to talk more widely about the participation of aboriginal communities in the project, or how it aligned with projects where local knowledge was embraced. However, while there may be a place for reframing information in health behaviour, this focus on knowledge produced in measurable outcomes seems to have led to a framing of problem solving as changing how information is presented in pamphlets. This narrows structural problems of health inequity in Indigenous populations to one of behaviour that requires increased information to be fixed.

Behavioural insights and nudging have been criticised for ignoring, or taking attention away from, structural problems. For example, behavioural insights may frame poverty as a problem of decision making, providing a justification for not addressing structural causes of poverty and moving attention and resources away from these causes (Fine et al. 2016). Obesity is another area in which a focus on behaviour rather than structure is problematic. Interpreting obesity as a problem of behaviour distracts from structural or environment challenges in the affordability of healthy food (Roberts 2017). When obesity is framed as a behavioural problem of not choosing healthy food it reduces the potential for government to act on structural determinants of obesity (Smith and Toprakkiran 2019). Quigley and Farrell (2019) have argued that behavioural insights teams focus on 'lifestyle risks' such as obesity, which they try to solve by nudging behaviour, denies the complexity of these health issues. Such a focus "will continue to distract us from the fact that there are deeper socio-economic and educational factors which substantively influence health throughout people's lives"

(Quigley and Farrell 2019, 9). The pattern I identified above where policy actors understand policy as problems of behaviour further diminishes the structural causes of policy problems. Some academics have argued that using behavioural insights does not preclude the use of other policy tools (Schmidt and Engelen 2020). In practice, research has found that such tools work separately from behavioural insights, and they “do not talk to each other” (Ewert 2020, 350). As I have explored in the section above, in my research I found policy actors’ understandings of policy that is shaped by behavioural insights knowledge seems to contradict understandings of policy as structural.

In avoiding structural problems and instead focussing on problems of behaviour, behavioural insights seems to shaping understandings of policy problems as simple. For example, the ‘test phase’ of behavioural insights seems to focus attention on “tame” problems (Newman and Head 2017). In government rhetoric, wicked problems are seen as social and associated with values, and tame problems are seen as associated with problems of knowledge and solved using scientific solutions. I suggest behavioural insights is associated with tame problems. For example, a behavioural insights intervention may redesign a letter encouraging people to pay their fines to include social norming information that 9 out of 10 people pay their fine on time. That is, if publics knew that most people pay their fines on time, they would also pay their fines on time. In tame problems, more information or more knowledge will solve the policy problem (Newman and Head 2017). This seems to be reflected in the interviews where policy actors advocated for increased use of behavioural insights knowledge to both understand the real problem, and then use knowledge to also solve the problem. The selection and privileging of randomised control trials also redirects policy attention from big questions to small questions (Reddy 2012). This is driven by the method of

randomised control trials which requires variables that can be identified as causing the problem. Big questions have many variables driving the problem, which are complicated and difficult to 'control' in a randomised control trial. These big questions are ignored in the quest to find what works (Reddy 2012). Rather the focus on randomised control trials and on tame problems suggests that policy problems are seen as simple and measurable.

7.4 POLICY AS MEASURABLE BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS?

Knowledge from the 'understand phase' is associated with patterns where policy problems are behavioural. Knowledge from the 'test phase' influences understandings of policy as measurable and simple. Taken together, this suggests that behavioural insights knowledge is influencing policy actors to see policy as measurable, behavioural and simple. Behavioural insights knowledge could seep into the background of ideas of the policy terrain and lead to policy actors interpreting policy problems as behavioural, measurable and simple. However, this obscures the tensions in knowledge and between behavioural insights models I have observed in my research.

In the previous chapters I used an analytical model to illustrate the uses of knowledge in behavioural insights. I include below in orange the conceptual influence of knowledge in behavioural insights to illustrate this tension, and how this has flown through the instrumental, political and conceptual use of knowledge. In Chapter 5, I explored how behavioural insights is seen as drawing on and producing knowledge, which is illustrated in light blue in Figure 7-1 below. Policy actors advocate for the use of local knowledge in the 'understand phase', and the importance of first understanding the real problem before solving it. Policy actors contended with supporting local

knowledge, which struggled to fit into processes that privileged technical knowledge. There was a tension between these knowledges, and how local, experiential knowledge sits with technical knowledge. When using knowledge politically, illustrated in green, policy actors whose authority rested on local knowledge, did not view these knowledges as complementary but rather conflicting, and sought to criticise technical knowledge as unethical. In this process, policy actors label and contest evidence, drawing on craft and normative knowledge to support their arguments. They contest the privileged status of randomised control trials arguing a focus on these trials takes attention away from other important problems and projects.

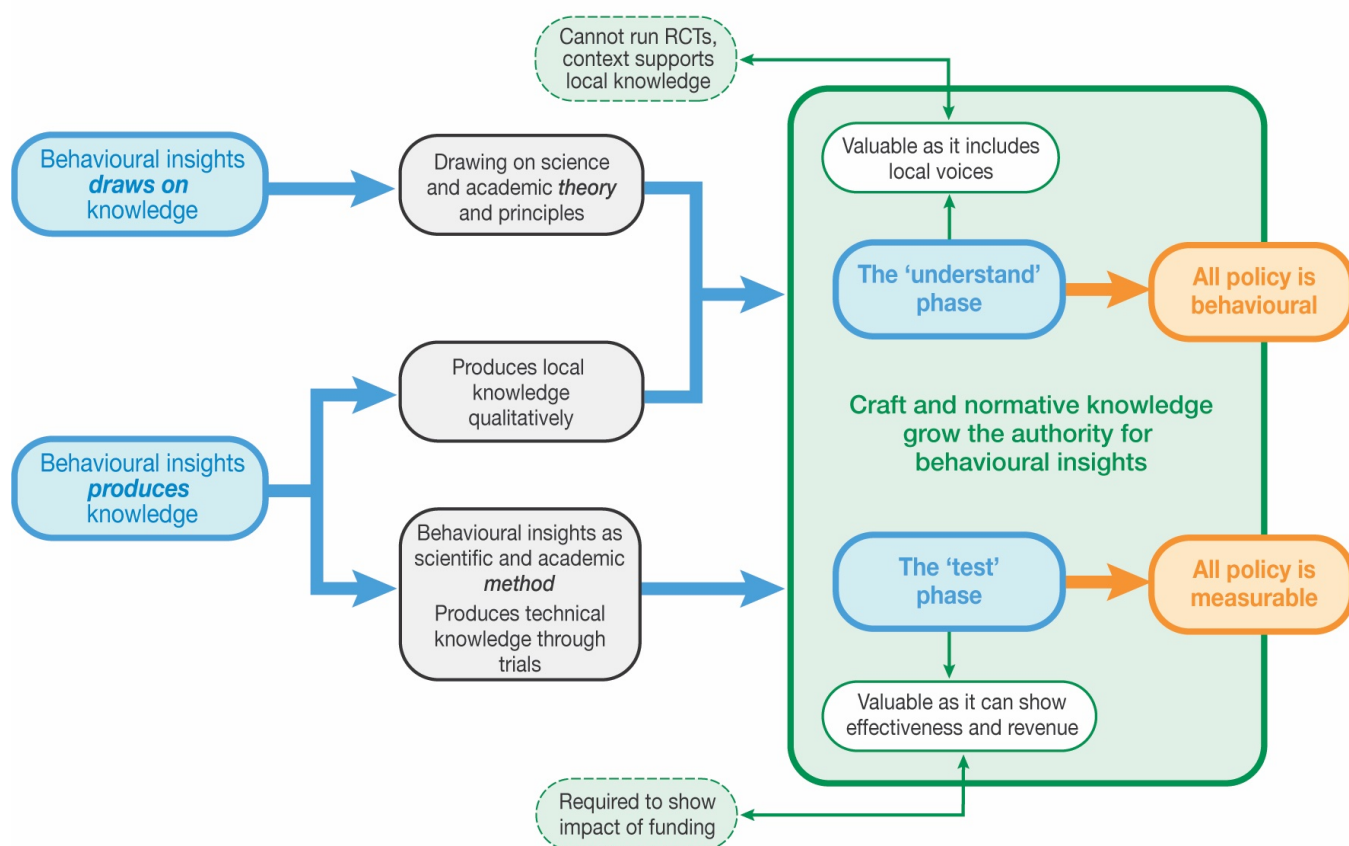


Figure 7-1

In orange I consider how knowledge may be shaping policy to be understood as behavioural or measurable. This analytical model helpfully demonstrates how the interpretation of policy problems as driven by behaviour is typically associated with policy actors who advocate for local knowledge in the 'understand phase', and policy as measurable with policy actors who advocate for a behavioural insights model which emphasises the 'test phase'. To merge these two understandings suggests that policy actors passively receive knowledge, or are shaped by knowledge. However, I have suggested that policy actors are perhaps better conceptualised as situated agents in behavioural insights who consider, reflect on and negotiate their own belief systems

and their context when interpreting and using knowledge. In the same way, I suggest that knowledge does not passively creep into the background of ideas about policy, but policy actors are shaped by and also shape knowledge as they consider and reflect on knowledge. They negotiate this knowledge. Thus suggesting that knowledge may be influencing policy actors' understandings of policy problems as simple, behavioural, and measurable, suggests that that actors are passively receiving knowledge. This denies the agency of the actors who use behavioural insights knowledge and contest evidence to compete for policy authority that I have identified in the previous chapters. I consider this process in the following section.

7.5 THE INFLUENCE OF BEHAVIOURAL INSIGHTS KNOWLEDGE

In this section I consider the reasons behavioural insights knowledge may be influential on policy actors. Knowledge may 'affect the issues people think about and the way they think about them.' (Weiss 1986, 275). There is limited research into the processes where knowledge becomes influential for policy makers (Stevens 2007). In this section I cautiously assert why behavioural insights might appeal based on my empirical research. Reflecting the tone of this chapter, this section is more of a meta-analysis and discussion about possible outcomes that is empirically based on my research and the literature.

7.5.1 The visibility of behavioural insights

When knowledges influence ideas about policy, it can focus or refocus attention on both policy problems and the selection of solution. Mostly, however policy actors do not seek out knowledge, as they rarely have the time or resources. Rather, they draw upon the information they have (Weiss 1986). When knowledge is sought out, policy actors are more likely to select evidence that aligns with current knowledge (Fleming

and Rhodes 2018). As policy actors seek to make sense of different knowledges, that which fits their current values, experiences, and expectations may be more influential. Thus behavioural insights knowledge may have influence as it fits with the dominant evidence-based policy paradigm in government administrations (Newman and Head 2017). As I have examined in the previous chapters, behavioural insights is interpreted as an evidence-based approach to policy making, and an instrumental application of technical knowledge. Thus behavioural insights knowledge may more readily have influence as it aligns with policy actors' conceptions of policy making. However, the theory of irrationality conflicts with the dominant economic approaches to policy making, and this while behavioural insights 'fits' policy actor's ideas on policy, it still requires a reorienting or an introduction of new knowledge into understandings of the policy terrain.

Weiss (1986) has suggested that policy actors engage in a sense-making process, whereby new knowledge is assessed to see if it is legitimate and congruous with existing knowledge. New or contradictory knowledge must be repeated and come from several sources to be viewed as credible (Weiss 1986). This aligns with Steven's (2007, 28) research, which suggests that repetition plays an important role in how evidence can "become part of the accepted body of knowledge in a policy area" .

I suggest that the repetition of knowledge, that is, the repeated exposure to behavioural insights knowledge, may influence interpretations of policy problems. Policy actors hear about the role of behaviour in policy problems through advocacy activities, promoting the use of behavioural insights, which I examined in the previous chapter. Behavioural insights projects that use randomised control trials are given visibility and the evidence they produce is held up as a gold standard. Behavioural

insights case studies emphasising the value of behavioural insights are presented at seminars and available online through government websites and newsletters. Through this repeated exposure, knowledge from behavioural insights influences actors' understandings of policy problems. This repeated exposure also occurs for those actors who are advocating for behavioural insights. As policy actors undertake these promotional activities or are applying a behavioural 'lens' to policy problems they are also repeatedly exposed to these ideas. In this ways policy actors are both influenced by, and shape, these interpretations.

There is an agency as policy actors negotiate the conceptual use of knowledge. The literature describes how policy actors apply knowledge, or 'actively' use knowledge instrumentally or politically. However, they are passively influenced by knowledge. The concepts that are used in the literature of knowledge of "seeping" (Weiss 1986) or "creeping" (Radaelli 1995) assigns an agency to the knowledge, and a passivity to the actor. These chapters have revealed the agency of the actors as they shape and are shaped by this knowledge. This again suggests it is important to pay attention to the situated agency of the policy actors in the use of knowledge.

Situated agency is the theory that actors are shaped by, but not constrained by their context (Evans 2002). As I explored in the previous chapter, policy actors may have multiple and competing values and beliefs and use their situated agency to negotiate these beliefs, taking into account their context. I suggest that policy actors use their situated agency when sifting through knowledges that influence policy. In this way they are not only shaped by knowledge, but also shape this knowledge. They may draw on their existing knowledges of the policy terrain and their context in their exposure to new or different knowledge from behavioural insights which then influences what is

absorbed into understandings of policy and what is rejected.

7.5.2 Behavioural insights and altruism

Behavioural insights knowledge may also be influential in understandings of policy problems because it appeals to policy actors. In the interviews, I heard policy actors talk about how public servants are attracted to the public service because they want to help. One senior public servant commented,

When I would survey my staff, the number one thing that would come up as why do I stay in my job type of thing was making a difference. It wasn't pay. It wasn't conditions. (PS12)

Research into public service motivation suggests that public servants differ from private sector workers as they are motivated by a sense of public good and altruism. Public servants seem to be motivated by a concern for the community (Perry, Hondeghem, and Wise 2010) with a review of research suggesting that “individuals are oriented to act in the public domain for the purpose of doing good for others and society.” (Perry, Hondeghem, and Wise 2010, 687). Public servants are driven by a desire to help the public and communities and behavioural insights provides a means to do so.

I note here that the concept of ‘helping people’ is reflected in the theory of Libertarian Paternalism. Libertarian Paternalism suggests government’s role is to help the public make better choices, whilst still leaving them free to make alternate choices (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). Many of the policy actors I interviewed were not familiar with the

term Libertarian Paternalism. Those who were familiar with the term, and the academic theory that Thaler and Sunstein had proposed, did not see the term as relevant to the Australian context. Rather, as Lepenies and Malecka (2020) have asserted, behavioural insights was associated more closely with evidence-based policy than Libertarian Paternalism. Nonetheless, public servants commented that the value demonstrated by behavioural insights appealed as they wanted to use their policy work to affect positive change. Behavioural insights, aligning to evidence-based policy discourses, gave confidence to policy actors that using behavioural insights will achieve their policy outcomes. Moreover because of the focus on measurement and testing, public servants can see the impact of their actions through the charts and graphs produced from trialling interventions. In framing policy problems as simple and measurable, policy actors can rely on behavioural insights to solve the problems and they can then see the impact of their action.

Fay's (1975) work on social theory and political practice provides another useful lens to understand the influence of behavioural insights knowledge. Fay argues that technical or positivist science is causal. That is, in science, knowledge is produced as causal explanations, for example Y can be predicted to happen due to X. In many ways his work is mirrored in later work on the instrumental, linear, and rational work espoused by Weiss in her models of research use and in the evidence-based policy making literature. However, what is useful about Fay's work is that it explicitly considers and draws attention to the framing of scientific or technical knowledge as causal and explanatory. In this way it is a construction of reality which suggests that a problem can be controlled. Here positivist knowledge is related to "technical control and instrumental action" (Nustad and Sending 2000, 52). In scientific knowledge, providing the causal explanation for an outcome or 'phenomena' also provides a way

to then manipulate the phenomena (Fay 1975).

In the context of behavioural insights, the instrumental application of technical knowledge, and even the application of local knowledge that conforms to technical standards in behavioural insights processes, presents as a causal explanation and therefore a way of controlling policy problems. People's behaviour, and the biases and heuristics that the public are subject to, cause public policies to fail. The technical knowledge privileged in behavioural insights presents as an opportunity for public servants to control the phenomenon of biases and heuristics and help the public make better choices through behavioural insights. Here they are presented with not only an opportunity to help the public, but a means to do so. Through the instrumental application of behavioural insights knowledge, policy actors can change a variable X (the wording of a letter) to achieve Y (the on time payments of fines). It may also explain the narrow focus of behavioural insights on simple problems. Only those policy problems that can be causally explained can be intervened in. I have argued above that the understanding of public policy as behavioural is not a deliberate political strategy, but rather a reorientation of knowledge. Nor am I suggesting that the presentation of behavioural insights as causal knowledge is a political strategy developed to advance policy authority. Rather, when knowledge is 'sifted' by policy actors for credibility and fit, the technical knowledge which is causal may be kept as it provides opportunities for helping the public and solving problems.

As I have examined, while technical knowledge is privileged, policy actors also advocate for the use of local knowledge. I am unable to conclude in this thesis which knowledge will have influence, or dominate, in the long term. I suggest however, that which knowledge or authority "wins" is a less interesting question, or it may perhaps

even be a question without an answer. Knowledge will always be in flux and contested as it is underpinned by competing values. Evidence may not resolve, but prolong or sustain these contestations (Turnbull 2006). Examining the processes of knowledge use in policy and the tensions and contestations in these processes, rather than the outcomes, may be more useful in understanding the different voices in policy, and which values are prioritised and silenced. Focussing on these tensions can not only help understand theoretically, the competing priorities, values, and knowledges, and the actors and agency behind this use, but also further understandings of the practice of policy making.

7.5.3 The interdependency of knowledge

I now consider the knowledge processes I have examined in my thesis and how knowledges are both intertwined and separated. Tenbensen (2006) argues that successful policy does not reside with only one type of knowledge, but knowledges must be 'stitched' together. Interweaving different types of knowledge can strengthen policy making and policy outcomes.

In my research, knowledges were sometimes seen as complimentary but distinct. This is observed in the analysis of local and technical knowledge. For example, local knowledge is sometimes seen as complimentary to technical knowledge in behavioural insights processes. In the 'understand phase', local knowledge about service users experience is complemented by technical knowledge drawn from academic literature on the biases that may be relevant to a policy problem. However, behavioural insights is framed as an instrumental application of technical knowledge, which privileges technical and scientific evidence. Local knowledge is separated in an 'understand phase' and when used must conform to technical standards. While many

have argued that technical and local knowledge cannot be separated (Yanow 2000) the interpretation of them as separate, and the hierarchy required or demanded by evidence-based policy, creates a tension in the voices in policy making.

Other knowledges are also seen as complimentary. Craft knowledge is deployed when presenting technical knowledge in easily understood charts or in local knowledge, using extensive direct quotes to executive teams. Normative knowledge is used to advocate for the use of local or technical knowledge. For example, policy actors argued that local knowledge should be included in behavioural insights, or randomised control trials should be used to understand what works. However normative knowledge is also contained or separated from local knowledge, such as when the normative knowledge of the community is separated from their local knowledge, and instead technified to fit into academic and scientific processes.

I have used the framework of technical, local, craft and normative to explore how each knowledge is understood and used in behavioural insights. It is helpful analytically to differentiate between these knowledges. Recognising these different knowledges and the various ways in which they are used in behavioural insights practice brings attention to the ways in which policy shapes and is shaped by these knowledges, and which voices are included or excluded from these processes. My research suggests that these knowledges are always inherently part of policy making yet in policy practice, separating them through hierarchies and labelling forces a tension into policymaking in having to pick and choose between types of knowledge.

Not only do different types of knowledge permeate behavioural insights, policy actors used them in different ways. Local and technical knowledge were used instrumentally in behavioural insights processes. This seemed to mutually shape or reinforce the

framing of behavioural insights as an instrumental application of knowledge, and its association with evidence-based policy making. Craft knowledge was also sometimes used instrumentally, as a resource to develop interventions, complimentary to local knowledge and to understand the policy problem. Despite policy actors' use of craft and normative knowledge in behavioural insights processes, the denial or perceived absence of these knowledges reinforces the framing of behavioural insights as an instrumental, evidence-based use of knowledge. Craft and normative knowledge were also used politically in the advocacy of behavioural insights and in the selection of projects. The political use of knowledge and the vigour with which behavioural insights has been promoted may have shaped interpretations that all policy has a behavioural or measurable dimension.

This chapter on the conceptual influence of knowledge built on the previous two empirical chapters on the instrumental and political use of knowledge. In doing so, this thesis has highlighted how the instrumental, political and conceptual use of knowledges are not distinct, but interwoven, supporting and interacting in policy making. This remainder of this section draws together this analysis to highlight how the uses of knowledge are intertwined.

The instrumental, political and conceptual knowledge use shapes the influence and impact of the other. In my research, policy actors interpret behavioural insights as an instrumental approach to policy. Here I consider the use of knowledge 'instrumental' as policy actors perceive that information drawn on or produced in behavioural insights is used in policy projects to solve policy problems. For example, a randomised control trial might test different version of a letter to encourage on time payment of a fine and the data from this trial then directs which letter will be used. Behavioural insights is not

instrumental in the sense that it is removed from values or politics. This instrumental framing of behavioural insights as using evidence to solve policy problems is given visibility and authority through the political use of knowledge. Policy actors advocate for behavioural insights as an evidence-based approach that works. This policy authority then reinforces the instrumental use of knowledge in behavioural insights as it legitimises policy actors' use of the approach in government. In this way the political and instrumental are interdependent and self-reinforcing.

The political use of knowledge also shapes the conceptual influence of knowledge. The advocacy of behavioural insights leads to visibility of behavioural insights which, through repeated exposure, influences policy actors' understandings of policy problems. Knowledge drawn on and produced through behavioural insights influences the background of ideas about policy, of policy as behavioural or measurable. This conceptual influence of behavioural insights knowledge then reproduces the authority of actors using behavioural insights to solve behavioural or measurable problems, thereby supporting both the instrumental and political use of knowledge.

In some ways this model of interdependent knowledge could be captured in Weiss' (1979) interactive approach to policy making. Here in a sense-making process, actors search for and interact with different types of knowledge, including the political and normative, alongside empirical knowledge (Weiss 1979). Decisions are made in the context of conflicting or absent evidence, drawing on opinion and with regards to the political circumstances, and reflects a process of group decision making. It views knowledge or evidence as technical and objective and a resource to be drawn upon (Elliott and Popay 2000). The model however, speaks to networks and the development of alliances to advance priorities (Williams and Bryan 2007) and

emphasises collective decision making (Rafter 1984). In my research I examine the use of knowledge from the perspective of the policy actor, rather than at a network or group level. While this interactive model helpfully draws attention to the messy, non-linear experience of policy making I suggest that the framework of instrumental, political and conceptual uses of knowledge was more helpful in revealing the contestations and impact of knowledge, from the perspective of policy actors.

Other research has found that evidence may be used instrumentally, politically and conceptual at different points in the policy making process, in different political environments (Davies 2012). For example, Davies found that in the area of Impact Assessments, evidence is used instrumentally to determine the distribution of resources for a project, conceptually when understanding the impacts of a policy, and symbolically when a decision about a project has been decided. Actors also used evidence instrumentally to distribute resources for Education projects, but also symbolically, or politically to withdraw support for the same program when the political context changed (Davies 2012). Research has also suggested that the conceptual use of research is more pronounced than the political or instrumental (Amara, Ouimet, and Landry 2004). Amara et al. (2004) argue from their large scale quantitative study of the use of university research in government, that instrumental, conceptual and symbolic (or political) uses of knowledge are applied together in government policy arenas, rather than in opposition. The different uses of knowledge may be more or less dominant at different times. I note however these studies investigated policy actors' use of external research. In my research this boundary is blurred, as policy actors are both research producers and research users, and they are both shaping and shaped by knowledge.

My research suggests that the instrumental, political and conceptual use of knowledge are neither in opposition nor complimentary. The uses of knowledges are not separate, rather the instrumental, political and conceptual uses of knowledge are interdependent and interwoven. Knowledge use can be thought of as a symbiotic, contingent, system in policy making.

7.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter is perhaps more hesitant in drawing conclusions given the challenges in analysing the conceptual use of knowledge over a short time frame. Nonetheless, I have drawn attention to emerging patterns that indicate the impact of behavioural insights on understandings of the policy problem. The ‘understand phase’ of behavioural insights seems to be associated with policy actors interpreting all policy problems as behavioural, whereas the ‘test phase’ seems to be associated with interpreting policy problems as simple and measurable. I suggest that these two understandings of policy cannot simply be merged into an understanding of policy as behavioural and measurable, as this denies the situated agency of the policy actors and the tensions in knowledge and advocacy examined in the previous chapters. Rather I draw attention to the importance of situated agency in understanding how and why behavioural insights knowledge may influence interpretations of the policy process. In doing so I draw attention to the interdependence of instrumental, political and conceptual uses of knowledge.

In the final conclusion chapter, I consider the implications of these empirical chapters on theory and practice and the contributions of this thesis to literature on behavioural insights, interpretive policy analysis, and theories of knowledge utilisation.

8 CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

8.1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis has examined the interpretations and uses of knowledge in behavioural insights. In this final chapter I conclude the thesis by providing a summary of the context which influenced my research question, my research approach, and my analysis and discussion. I then consider the limitations of the research, before discussing implications and recommendations that relate to the different types and hierarchies of knowledge in behavioural insights and what my thesis has demonstrated for the literature on knowledge uses in public policy. I conclude with policy implications and areas for further research.

8.2 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Behavioural insights is an approach to public policy that applies research on people's behaviour from psychology and behavioural economics in policy making. It is associated with nudges and randomised control trials as the best way of finding 'what works'. There are now over 200 institutions using behavioural insights in policy making (OECD 2021). Behavioural insights seemed to align with an instrumental use of knowledge, where technical knowledge is applied to policy problems. However, there was limited empirical research to understand the different types of knowledge that permeate behavioural insights, and how policy actors use this knowledge. Knowledge in policy has long been an area of study for academics who were keen to understand their influence, and how their research can and should be used in policy making (Weiss 1979). The study of knowledge in public policy also provides rich understandings of how policy problems are understood and which voices have a say in policy making. Therefore, the role of knowledge in behavioural insights has

implications for the voices in public policy and the way in which policy is understood and shaped by policy actors.

The central research question of this thesis was how do policy actors interpret and use knowledge in behavioural insights? The two sub questions were which types of knowledges are used, and how are these knowledges used instrumentally, politically and conceptually?

To explore these uses of knowledge, I adopted an interpretive approach in my thesis. Interpretive approaches argue that actions are shaped by interpretation. In this thesis I completed thirty interviews with policy actors in Australia who were familiar with or used behavioural insights in their policy work. This included public servants in dedicated behavioural insights teams, public servants who had worked on behavioural insights projects, and academics who consulted to government on behavioural insights. Theory was developed abductively, as I went between academic literature and data, searching for tensions and surprises.

My research found that policy actors interpret behavioural insights as an instrumental use of knowledge. Behavioural insights is perceived as an evidence-based approach as it draws on and produces knowledge. In the 'understand phase' of behavioural insights, policy actors draw on knowledge from academic literature to understand the policy problem, sometimes using local knowledge to further explore the policy problem. Local knowledge is perceived as an important way of improving interventions and policy outcomes, but struggles to fit into an instrumental approach to policy making that privileges technical knowledge. Thus in behavioural insights the use of local knowledge conforms to expectations of technical knowledge and an instrumental approach to policy making. Technical knowledge is produced in the 'test phase'

through quantitative trials such as randomised control trials. Randomised control trials are seen as an important way of testing 'what works' reinforcing the evidence-based approach presented by behavioural insights. The 'test phase' leads to the production of quantitative data, with statistics and academic research given more weight than surveys or percentages.

Policy actors also use knowledge politically in behavioural insights. Policy actors' interpretation of behavioural insights as an instrumental application of knowledge leads them to engage in activities to advocate for the approach. They use craft knowledge to select and contest evidence to sustain and grow their model of behavioural insights which may emphasise either the 'understand' or 'test phase'. Policy actors who advocate for local knowledge also use normative knowledge to challenge other models of the approach. Throughout this process, policy actors label and contest evidence as they seek to grow their policy authority, which in turn legitimises their use of behavioural insights.

Knowledge from behavioural insights also seems to be conceptually influencing policy actors. The instrumental use of knowledge and political use of knowledge is reorienting policy actors to the policy terrain. I suggest that advocacy for the use of local knowledge to understand policy problems is leading to policy understood as problems of behaviour. The emphasis on trialling and testing to understand what works refocuses attention on measurable outcomes and simple policy problems. Behavioural insights knowledge may have influence because the political use of knowledge provides these phases with visibility and aligns with the altruism of the public sector.

My thesis demonstrates that these uses of knowledge are not distinct or even complementary, but interdependent. The interpretation of behavioural insights as an

instrumental evidence-based approach to policy making leads to actors using knowledge politically to advocate for the approach. This grants them the policy authority to apply behavioural insights instrumentally, but also frame policy problems. The visibility of behavioural insights projects then changes the way in which policy actors understand policy problems. Thus the political use of knowledge to advocate for the instrumental use of knowledge conceptually influences policy actors. Technical, local, craft and normative knowledge play a role in behavioural insights and are present in these policy making processes.

8.2.1 Limitations

In this section I consider the limitations of my research. Most of the policy actors I spoke to were either in behavioural insights teams or had worked on behavioural insights projects. This was a deliberate decision as I intended to speak to people who would be able to contribute to a discussion on behavioural insights. Nonetheless, this does mean that most of the voices I spoke to were supportive of behavioural insights as they had chosen to work in these terms or on behavioural insights projects. Other perspectives, such as those who had left behavioural insights teams or who could offer more critical interpretations were not included. This is not to say that all policy actors I spoke to were consistently positive about behavioural insights. There were also critical perspectives, however I would expect to see different patterns from other voices. Further, in this research I explore the instrumental, political, and conceptual use of knowledge. The political use of knowledge is often seen as the domain of political actors, such as politicians. In my research I was not able to include politicians in my interviews, although for my research I was interested in how behavioural insights

was enacted. Further research could explore the networks of support, including political support, that may grow or hinder the authority of behavioural insights.

My fieldwork took place between 2016 and 2017 and since then behavioural insights teams have emerged and been reshaped in the Australian government context. As this research is historically and culturally situated, it is not appropriate to generalise these empirical findings (Hawkesworth 2015). Rather, in this study I aim for analytical generalisability (Firestone 1993). That is, here I use empirical research to support theory, rather than generalising from a sample to a population. My research has empirical, theoretical and methodological implications which I explore further in the next section.

8.3 IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.3.1 Hierarchies of knowledge in behavioural insights

Local, technical, craft and normative knowledge all play a role in the behavioural insights approach in policy making. Thus the scholarly focus on behavioural insights as randomised control trials (for example Strassheim 2020) risks excluding other types of knowledge from understandings of behavioural insights. Along with a limited number of scholars that include consideration of other knowledges in the approach (Feitsma and Whitehead 2019; Ball and Feitsma 2020; Ball and Head 2021) my research demonstrates how a wider consideration of knowledge use in behavioural insights, beyond a focus on randomised control trials, will more fully represent the practice and the implications of behavioural insights.

Nonetheless, my research finds behavioural insights supports the current paradigm of evidence-based policy that privileges quantitative and technical information. The focus

on technical, abstracted data removes behaviour from its context. Thus, as I observed in my research, when behaviour is reduced to quantitative data, violent sexual assault is spoken of as equivalent to littering. Greater prominence could be given to context and local experiential knowledge. This is particularly relevant as behavioural insights practitioners assume the role of both research producers and users. Therefore, they potentially have greater influence in which knowledges are used and how, as they can both develop, advocate for, and apply knowledge and evidence.

My research also suggests that the literature on behavioural insights needs to pay attention to the processes of knowledge use. For example, in the case of local knowledge, attention needs to be paid not only to *if* local knowledge and community voices are included in policy making, but *how* they are interpreted, processed and incorporated. My research finds local knowledge, while supported by policy actors, is forced to conform with expectations of technical knowledge and instrumental applications. Despite overtures of making nudging more collaborative, local voices are treated as 'data' to be interpreted and managed by policy actors within government. This then has implications for public's normative knowledge, and what should be done in policy, which is removed from decision making. Therefore, behavioural insights, while seemingly responding to criticisms of been scientific or expert driven by including more participatory approaches is, in practice, conforming to and reinforcing the evidence-based policy paradigm which privileges technical knowledge. This reduces the potential for a more democratic approach to policy making proposed by some academics. Paying closer attention to the normative knowledge of the public, such as what they think policy should do based on their experiences, would also better reflect the intention of some policy actors. The exclusion of normative knowledge of the public

minimises both opportunities for community participation and the range of possible solutions to the policy problem that draws on local experiences.

Policy actors use normative knowledge when they advocate for behavioural insights and in doing so, policy actors are 'pushing for change'. Strassheim has argued that behavioural insights experts need to be aware "of the normative implications of their work – and of the fact that especially in times of success the instruments they are proposing might develop a political life of their own" (Strassheim 2021, 81). However, my research shows that policy instruments do not develop a life of their own, rather they are advocated for and contested. Recognising normative knowledge and its political use may lead to greater awareness of the implications of the actions of public servants and academics.

As with normative knowledge, craft knowledge is used but often tacit. Rhodes (Rhodes 2016b) has argued for a refocussing on the craft skills in public administration, that these skills need to be 'recovered'. Whether or not these skills are recognised, my research has demonstrated that they are present and used in policy making. For policy actors craft knowledge plays a role in supporting technical knowledge in behavioural insights processes. The craft knowledge the policy actors deploy in shaping and advocating for their model of behavioural insights was not often recognised, valued or given visibility. Yet craft knowledge can contain institutional memory about why some approaches may work or not. Including this knowledge in the study of public policy will provide a deeper understanding of policy making processes.

8.3.2 Interdependency of instrumental, political and conceptual knowledge

As argued, my findings demonstrate that it is important to pay attention to both what knowledge is used and how they are used. Academic literature and debates on which knowledge use is more prevalent or dominant in public policy have been useful in ensuring consideration of the role of knowledge beyond a direct application of instrumental knowledge to solve policy problems. However, my research suggests that knowledge uses should be seen as part of a whole. Not only do they exist together, they shape and are shaped by each other. Each knowledge use supports and sustains each other in what should be better thought of as a system of knowledge use. Boaz and Nutley (2019) have talked about systems as knowledge mobilisation and understanding research producers, users and the structures. However here I refer to the contingent, conditional, symbiotic nature of knowledges use. The implication for academic scholarship and the knowledge utilisation literature, is that it is this 'system' that should be included in the study of knowledge.

In the study of knowledge, evidence-based policy making is a more recent incarnation of knowledge utilisation, and more recently again the literature has proposed evidence-informed policy making (Boaz and Davies 2019). I have noted the challenge with using the terms evidence or knowledge. In academic scholarship they are often used interchangeably, however I propose that using the term knowledge, rather than evidence, focusses attention on the concept of evidence as a label and a political practice. Evidence is not simply produced, and the contests and making or unmaking of knowledge into evidence are an importance point of insight for academics and

practitioners in, firstly, understanding the political environment and secondly, revealing the tensions in what knowledge, and which voices count in policy making.

8.3.3 Interpretive tensions in policy analysis

The tensions I have explored in policy making are an important area of focus in policy studies. Indeed, the abductive approach I used which searched for tensions and surprises revealed some of the most fruitful areas of analysis in my research. Scholars have noted and argued for the importance of tensions in policy analysis, and searching for puzzles between the literature and the data (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). However, Boswell and Corbett (2015) have argued that these tension may be smoothed over in pursuit of a “cleaner or more interesting account” (Boswell and Corbett 2015, 218), whereas these tensions should instead be “cherished” (Yanow 2000, 8). I echo calls made by other scholars who argue for a focus on the tensions *within* public policy (Tenbensen 2004). Tenbensen (2004) suggests focussing on the tensions between types of knowledge, and the context in which these tensions are produced, will strengthen policy making in government. These tension therefore become a point of insights, not to be smoothed away, but as a focus of analysis. Such tensions are not just between the data and the literature, but the tensions *within* the data and the tensions *within* individuals. As Turnbull (Turnbull 2006) has argued, policy problems may stabilise, but they are not resolved. Focussing on these tensions in policy studies can thus make important contributions to the study of knowledge, about who is speaking, who is silenced, and what such conflicts might lead to. A focus on *interpretive tensions* thus becomes useful in the study of public policy analysis.

Methodologically, my thesis recommends that situated agency be considered as a useful concept for knowledge utilisation theory. Policy actors use their situated agency

when considering not only which knowledge (local or technical or craft or normative) to use but also how to use that knowledge. Public servants consider their competing sets of beliefs and the context in which they take action when considering which knowledges to advocate for in behavioural insights. For example, policy actors interpreted that behavioural insights needs to be grown and sustained. They then choose to emphasise and advocate for types of knowledge in behavioural insights on the belief that using this knowledge will lead to the policy authority to enable them to continue using and growing behavioural insights. Viewing the use of knowledges through interpretive policy analysis can help pay more attention to actors and the processes in the way they consider, contest, and negotiate the tensions in evidence.

Applying interpretive approaches to the use of knowledge in behavioural insights has also led to implications for the methodology of interpretive policy analysis. Firstly, my research has suggested that policy actors can hold multiple sets of beliefs that may be in tension. When actors engage in policy making activities, they use their situated agency to consider and reflect on these beliefs, and the contexts in which they operate. Secondly, behavioural insights theory proposes that policy actors may also, at times, act because they are guided by the decision making environment rather than on their beliefs. When these actions conflict with their beliefs, these beliefs may then be adjusted. These findings have implications for interpretive policy analysis, and the need to focus on interpretive tensions and on the context in which actions take place.

8.4 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Although behavioural insights presents as an instrumental use of knowledge, aligning with evidence-based policy rhetoric, the use of knowledge is also political and shapes the way policy problems are understood. For policy actors, this means recognising

that the work they do has implications beyond simply providing the best evidence. The processes they support or criticise may not only influence the voices that are heard in policy, it may come to shape the way they, and other actors, conceive of policy problems. The exclusive focus on behavioural insights may lead to policy actors inadvertently applying a behavioural lens to all policy making. Policy actors may need to work to ensure that other approaches and other understandings of policy problems and the policy terrain are not forgotten.

For policy actors, embracing multiple types of knowledges is helpful in strengthening policy making (Tenbensen 2006). Including multiple knowledges leads to including multiple voices in policy making, leading to stronger, richer research and investigations. However, as Tenbensen (2006) has noted, “stitching” together knowledges is not simple. He suggests that academic teachers have a role in teaching students of public policy about the different types of knowledges. I would add that the policy actors I spoke to were quite adept at intertwining knowledges, however this was not explicit. Encouraging recognition of craft and normative knowledge as important for policy making alongside local and technical knowledge, may assist in advancing this use.

8.5 AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

My thesis suggests several areas for further study. My research has provided important insights for the role of policy actors in the use of knowledge in behavioural insights. However, as others have noted, behavioural insights study benefits from attention to not only at the micro level, but meso and macro level (Ewert 2000). Behavioural insights practitioners are also networked actors (Strassheim 2021) and understanding how this network shapes knowledge interpretation and use, and

conversely, how knowledge use may shape these networks, would provide rich insights to complement my findings.

My study also focussed on those at the centre of the behavioural insights approach. As I have noted Chapter 4, this was both a methodological and pragmatic decision. However, including more critical policy actors in research could further insights on the interpretation and use of knowledge. This could include policy actors who have worked on behavioural insights projects, but have chosen to not use the approach or public servants who no longer work in behavioural insights teams. The inclusion of such different perspectives could reveal, for example, if knowledge may be used politically by more critical actors to limit the policy authority of behavioural insights, and shed light on potential tensions between policy approaches. For example, I noted that co-design was sometimes interpreted as a complimentary approach. Exploring how knowledge may permeate and be in tension between these approaches would be a useful contribution.

When considering other policy approaches, further research could explore how participatory approaches, such as co-design and human-centred design, are used to legitimise and bring in these other types of knowledge. Research into how these approaches, such as behavioural insights and co-design fit, or do not, or how each legitimises the use of the other, would be useful for deepening understandings of the different types of knowledge that are drawn into policy making and how they are used.

8.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter has described the contribution and implications of my research. I have argued that behavioural insights practices embody different types of knowledge, although these are not always reflected on and valued, limiting the potential of the approach to encompass a more democratic, citizen-focussed, effective approach to policy making. I have suggested that bringing in the concept of situated agency focusses the attention on the process of knowledge use and how public servants negotiate tensions between beliefs and in their administrative context. However, in doing so, I have also proposed challenges to the intentionality between belief and action presented by interpretive policy analysis. I have also argued that the use of knowledges in behavioural insights is better conceived of as a system of interdependent uses of knowledge.

In concluding this thesis, I focus beyond behavioural insights to argue for the importance of exploring tensions in policy analysis. These tensions have been the source of much insight. My abductive approach brought rigour to the study of these tensions as I intentionally searched for surprises and tensions between my data and the literature. I also focussed on the tensions in the interviews, and the contradictions as policy actors engaged in a sense-making process when talking about behavioural insights. These revealed tensions in beliefs and in the use of knowledge in behavioural insights. Thus finally, I conclude the thesis by arguing for a focus on interpretive tensions in the study of policy making.

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