

Psychologists stake their claim for input into policy

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Research by social psychologists could and should play a bigger role in local and national policymaking, say a group of Sussex academics.

It is usually [economists](#) who receive an attentive hearing from [civil servants](#) and ministers, they claim, while experts from social psychology are listened to with half an ear, if at all.

But the [social phenomena](#) that psychologists study are just as important for society as any number of economic indicators, argue Professor Rupert Brown, Dr Richard de Visser, Dr Helga Dittmar, Dr John Drury, Dr Tom Farsides, Dr Donna Jessop and Dr Paul Sparks.

They illustrate their point with one area of [social behaviour](#) that is of particular concern to ministers: healthy living.

The trick, argue the researchers, is to make people feel good about themselves, rather than focusing on the dangers of behaviours that can damage health.

[Social psychology](#) is concerned with the attitudes and behaviour of people in and towards their social environments.

It focuses on how people's relationships – with other individuals, with others in their groups, or with those who belong to different groups – affect behaviour and how they are, in turn, affected by the social context in which people find themselves.

“Given that a primary object of many policy initiatives is to change people’s behaviour, obtaining a modicum of social psychological input to the formulation and evaluation of those initiatives would seem to be at least desirable,” argue the Sussex psychologists in the latest issue of the journal [Public Policy Research](#).

It appears that many people are not sufficiently motivated by health concerns to change their behaviour (e.g. alcohol use, diet and physical activity) and, even if they are, they may not feel that they have access to and understand information about healthy and unhealthy choices.

For example, studies show that many people do not understand how to use government guidelines about alcohol intake and that, of those who do, many don’t consider them to be realistic or helpful.

A [recent study](#) by Sussex psychologist Dr Richard de Visser revealed that people typically overestimated the volume of a unit of different alcoholic drinks.

So most people underestimate how much they actually drink. “Findings like these indicate a need to develop alcohol guidelines that are easier for people to understand and to put into practice,” say the Sussex psychologists.

Provided by University of Sussex

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