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promoting excellence in psychology

Using psychology to make better policy

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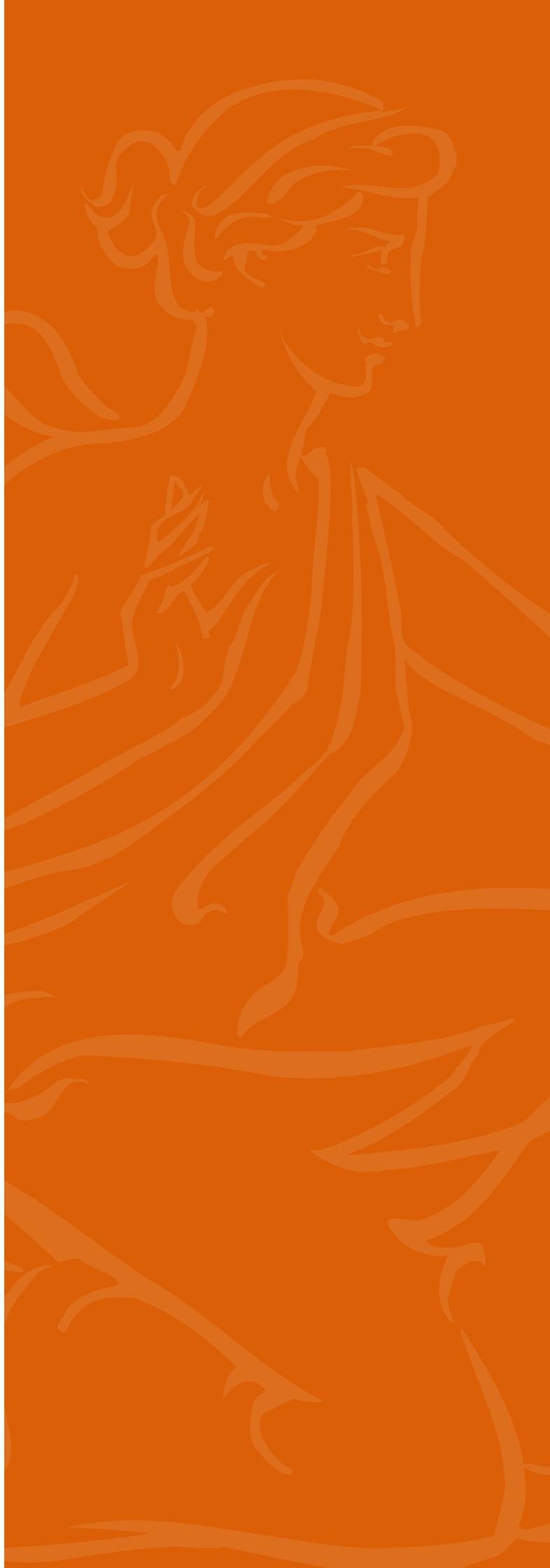consult@bps.org.uk

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About the British Psychological Society

The British Psychological Society (BPS) is the representative body for psychology and psychologists in the UK. We are responsible for the promotion of excellence and ethical practice in the science, education, and practical applications of psychology. We have 72,000 members and subscribers across the UK, ranging from students to qualified chartered psychologists.

We support and enhance the development and application of psychology for the greater public good. We set high standards for research, education and knowledge, and seek to disseminate this to increase wider public awareness of psychology and its importance. As part of this work we want to ensure that the value of psychology to society is recognised by policy-makers and used to inform policy development across government.

What is psychology?

Psychology is the scientific study of the mind and how it influences our behaviour, from communication and memory to thought and emotion.

Psychology is about understanding what makes people tick and how this understanding can help us address many challenges in society today.

Psychology is both a thriving academic discipline and a vital professional practice. As a science it is dedicated to the study of human behaviour – and the thoughts, feelings, and motivations behind it. Through observation, measurement and testing, psychologists generate evidence and form conclusions that are based on sound scientific methodology. Using this evidence base, practitioner psychologists deliver psychologically informed interventions in many environments – schools, health settings, the justice system and work.

About the Psychological Government Programme

Terms such as 'place-making', 'people-centred' and 'wellbeing' are back on the policy agenda. These are all new potential approaches to developing policy.

There is an appetite in government for a 'new way of doing things' and developing an evidence-based policy-making framework. However, while the need to bring people (and their psychology) into the policy-making process is well understood, there is often a lack of clarity regarding how this can be done.

Policies fail and governments don't get re-elected if they don't connect with the people they serve. This can be linked to an inherent flaw or missed opportunity within the design of the policy itself; a lack of understanding of the environmental or social contexts – namely place; or the failure to understand and include the people affected by these decisions which can in turn lead to feelings of inequality, disenfranchisement, stigma and populism.

It is at this junction between people, place and policy that psychology and psychologists can provide insights, expertise and frameworks of thinking.

The BPS Psychological Government Programme aims to offer a way to move past these barriers by identifying, developing and delivering a psychological approach to policy-making, which places people first.

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Psychology in policy

Politics does not happen within a vacuum. People ultimately remain at the heart of policy-making. Understanding people, how they work, and what pressures they work under is of paramount importance if we want to ensure that our political system remains fit for purpose.

Questions of identity and connection have a tremendous impact on the way in which people react to policy, there is a clear need to understand people in order to develop better policy outcomes.

People are units of policy-making and policy-makers are human too.

An understanding of policy that is underpinned by psychology opens up the possibility of new, evidence-based tools and frameworks that can lead to more effective decision-making by policy-makers.

This document will show how psychological insights can be applied to political decision-making at both the individual and policy-development level. It will introduce the British Psychological Society's wider programme of work on psychologically informed policy-making.

Thinking fast

Policy-makers face unusually strong and constant pressures on their thinking and emotions. They need to gather information and make decisions quickly and effectively, often in highly charged political atmospheres. In order to do so, people develop **heuristics** (mental short-cuts) and unconsciously rely on **biases** to make quick decisions.

Heuristic reasoning is a largely unconscious process – that people often believe is founded on logic. For example, after having faced a similar type of situation a few times, individuals can respond very quickly, as if on autopilot.

However, these cognitive and emotional shortcuts can lead to thoughts and actions which are undertaken without a full understanding of the underlying reasons for these actions. In effect, relying on heuristics can become 'act first, think later' where people remain unaware of the influence their personality, past experiences, physiological state, and personal preferences might have had on their individual scrutiny of a situation or policy issue.[1]

One of the advantages of using heuristics is that they take less time to implement compared with conventional processing and can be particularly useful in time-pressured situations.[4] There is evidence suggesting that heuristic modes of reasoning also underpin judgement, particularly when people assess risk and uncertainty.[2]

If deployed effectively, heuristics can be a strength – for example a paramedic who responds to an emergency by basing their actions on their training and past experiences would likely be relying on heuristic modes of thinking. However, identifying these modes of reasoning and providing space for reflection as well as checks and balances based on psychological evidence, provides a very powerful way of improving strategic choice and subsequent policy outcomes.

However, rapid decision-making and short-cut strategies can also lead to 'systematic and predictable errors'[3] that may affect policy-makers such as:

'REPRESENTATIVE' HEURISTIC

The decision to incorporate new information into one's thought process is taken on the basis of how similar the new information is in relation to something that is already known.

This is commonly seen when policy-makers make assumptions about the political views of voters and as a result place greater emphasis on an argument which they believe would be consistent with the perceived opinion of their constituents[1].

'AVAILABILITY' HEURISTIC

The 'Availability' heuristic assumes that, if it is easy to bring an example to mind, then the phenomenon in question is common or important. This can lead to an over-representation of certain issues in the policy landscape at the expense of subjects which are not as concrete in the minds of the beholder.

For example the perceived threat of terrorism is high in both the public and political

consciousness however, the less 'visible' threat of air pollution is perceived as lower and as a result potentially less worthy of immediate scrutiny. For example, this could have a profound impact on the scope and focus of a select committee enquiry as well as the manner in which individual committee members engage with the evidence.

'ANCHORING AND ADJUSTMENT' HEURISTICS

People are prone to accepting the 'starting point' or argument premise they are given and then use their judgement to adjust that position accordingly. In politics, these effects can be seen in the manner highly contentious issues such as Brexit or immigration are framed. While the strategic policy-making processes will typically involve individuals, groups, as well as wider political and environmental factors, the initial judgements and preferences of individual decision makers are a vital starting point.

RAPID DECISION-MAKING AND SHORTCUT STRATEGIES CAN LEAD TO 'SYSTEMATIC AND PREDICTABLE ERRORS' THAT MAY AFFECT MPS

Biases

Psychological research has shown that our understanding of the world is not objective. Regardless of our political leanings, most people are highly motivated to protect their existing views which can lead to bias.[1] For example, we have a tendency to:

- Place greater value and emphasis on opinions we agree with as facts (confirmation bias) which can also lead to dismissing facts and perspectives which do not fit within our world view prior to critically engaging with them.

- Become overly reliant on the first piece of information received which establishes the initial range of reasonable possibilities (anchoring bias).

- Think we're better than the average at accomplishing most things or otherwise overestimate our knowledge (illusory superiority).

- Be susceptible to the 'endowment effect' where things (or for example, government policies) become more valuable as soon as they become ours.

- Judging a decision based on its outcome rather than evaluating the processes through which the decision was made (outcome bias).

- And overly focusing on surviving examples which may not be truly representative (survivorship bias).

We have a tendency to look for, notice, and remember information that fits with our pre-existing expectations and to ignore or dismiss contradictory information, this can have a huge impact on the quality of our decision-making and scrutiny – leading to important evidence being ignored, rejected, or examined in a biased manner[5].

Raising awareness of psychological biases and their universal existence both in ourselves, our political counterparts, and our policy areas of scrutiny, is a necessary step towards overcoming them.

Avoiding 'Groupthink'

The overlaps between political ideology and the operational responsibility of becoming a Member of Parliament can be a fine line to balance. This balance is not only difficult to maintain but can also lead individuals to fall subject to 'groupthink' – either at the constituency, political party, select committee or organisational levels of parliament itself.

Psychological evidence shows that we have developed powerful mechanisms to encourage collective behaviour and avoid being rejected. As a result of groupthink, when a person deviates from an opinion held by the wider group, the brain evaluates it as an 'error' leading them to seek to adjust the behaviour that prompted the negative response from the wider group[6]. Not only does our brain create a strong incentive for 'toeing the line' through its reward centres,[7] its neurological pathways experience rejection from a group in a similar way as it experiences physical pain[8]. This can lead individuals to engage in self-censorship, or to avoid pursuing potentially contentious areas of work.[9]

'Groupthink' is not the same thing as reaching consensus. Reaching consensus requires effort, critical evaluation and is an intentional process while group-think primarily takes place at the subconscious level where people are unaware that they are being unduly influenced by others.[10]

While working as a group enables collective wisdom to be leveraged effectively, for this to take place, checks and balances as well as space for reflective thought are vital and should be explicitly integrated into the process.

Why does this matter?

Psychological research shows that heuristics and biases can have a tremendous impact on the manner in which policy-makers engage with evidence[1].

For example, questioning, when effective, is used to gain information and assists clear analysis, but ineffective questioning often results in time-wasting. Simply repeating facts or opinions which are already on the record or being perceived to be 'scoring political points'. This risks alienating people if they feel that they are being redirected into fitting in an overly partisan argument.[11]

Also, a policy-maker may feel antagonism towards a person giving what they perceive to be dubious evidence without realising that this is because they are 'carrying' a group emotion or bias with them.[12]

Given that groupthink, biases and heuristics often underpin decision-making processes in politics, incorporating psychological insight, training and support can have a hugely positive impact as policy-makers undertake their work.

When developing policy and legislation, governments take into account several factors which shape our lives including: the services we receive and how they are delivered, our behaviours and choices afforded to us, the conditions in which we live, and our relationships within society (ranging from familial to civic).

Ultimately, understanding and supporting the people designing policy, affected by policy, and delivering policy is key to the successful coordination and translation of the evidence-base into positive policy outcomes.

An introduction to psychologically informed policy-making tools

Psychology shows us that that we need to consider people within the context they live in, including social influences and networks, as well as their physical environment and physiological factors. We call this the 'biopsychosocial model'[13]. By focusing on determinants of behaviour and mechanisms of change, rather than simply the behaviour itself, biopsychosocial approaches can integrate the many complex influences on behaviour within a single comprehensive framework.

An example of a psychologically informed framework specifically designed for practitioners and policy-makers is the Behaviour Change Wheel (BCW) developed by Susan Michie, Lou Atkins and Robert West, which brings together 19 different frameworks of behaviour change interventions to understand and influence the drivers for change[14].

Through the BCW, different 'Intervention Functions' are used to target different components of a desired behaviour. These include education, training, restrictions, persuasion and incentives. The outer layer of the wheel then identifies seven 'Policy Categories', such as legislation, service provision, regulation or guidelines that can support the delivery of these interventions.
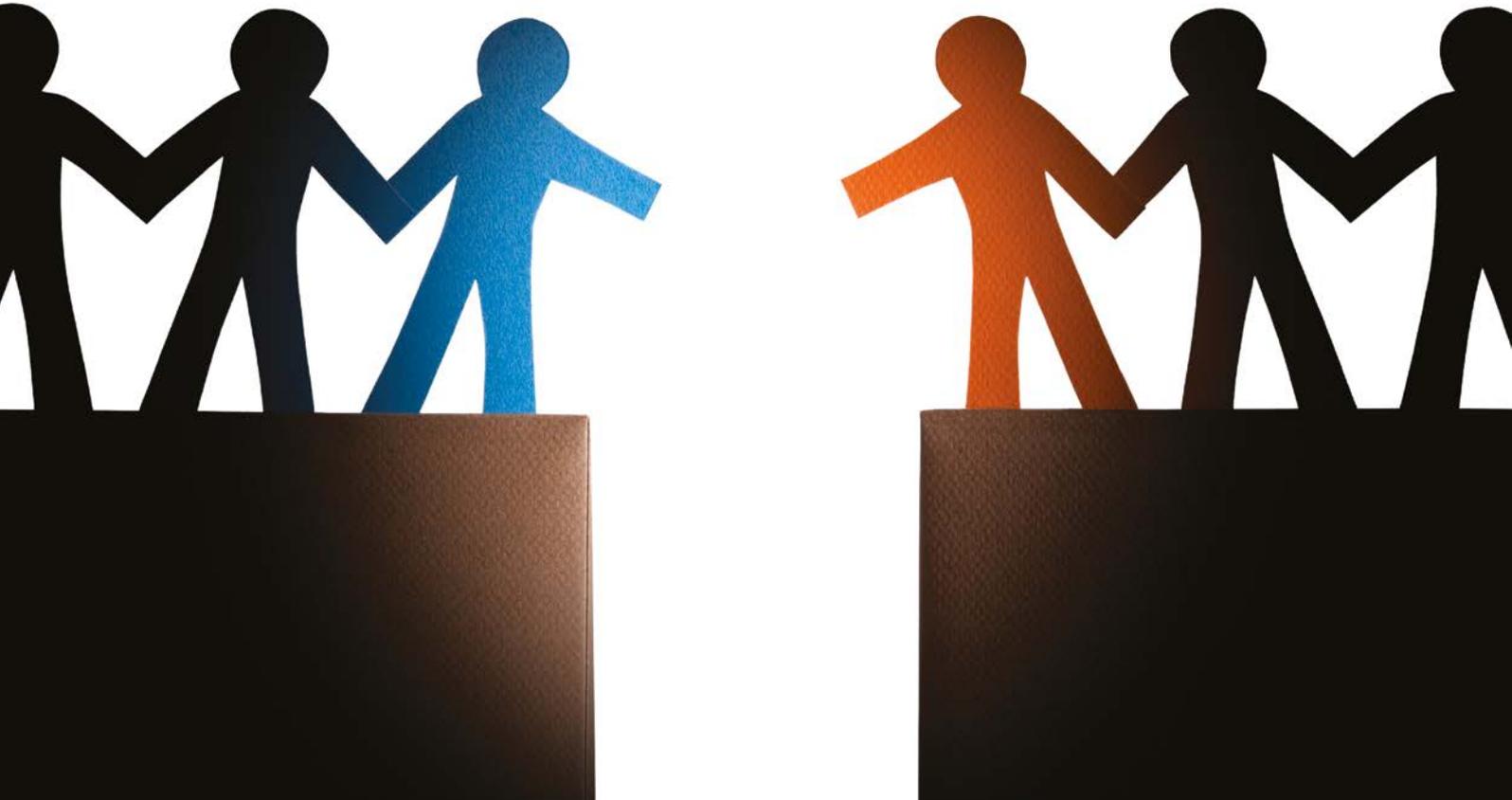
Behaviour Change Wheel (BCW)
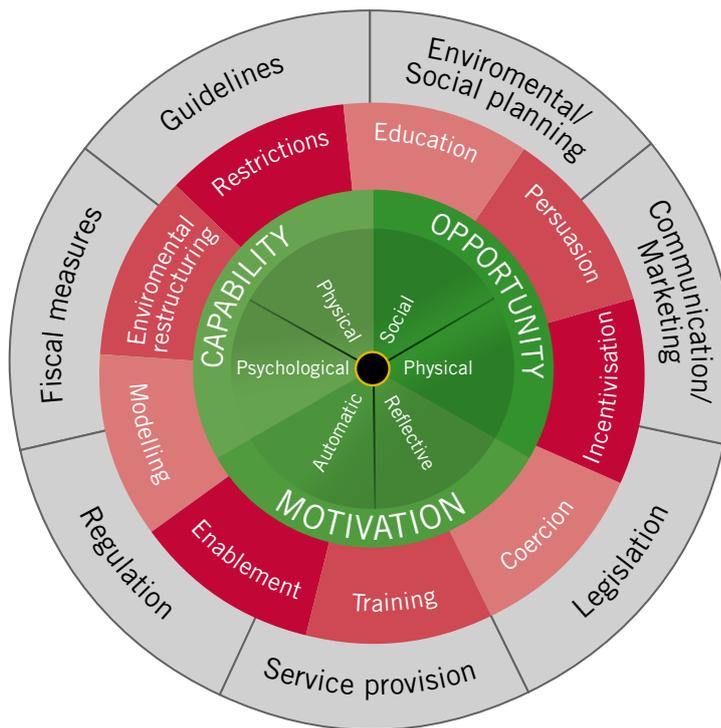
Further guidance on designing effective policy interventions is available on the Behaviour Change Wheel website

At the centre of the BCW is the 'COM-B model of behaviour' which sets out that behaviour change relies on if an individual has the **Capability** to enact the behaviour; whether their social and physical environment offers them the **Opportunity** to enable the behaviour; and if they have the **Motivation** to perform/avoid the behaviour[14].

By using tools such as the Behaviour Change Wheel, once the influences on a desired behaviour are understood, psychologically informed interventions can be designed and then embedded at the policy level to enable long-term and sustainable change – subject to rigorous and continuous evaluation.
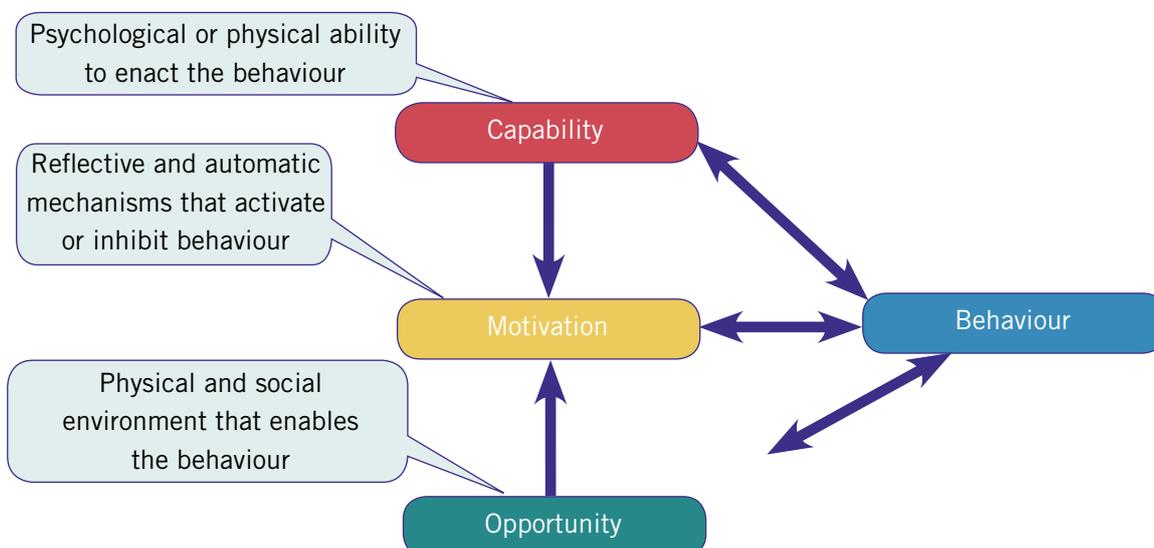
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Elected representatives go into office to do their best and to listen to the constituents they have been elected to serve for the next five years. While political affiliations and agendas may differ, the end goal across the political spectrum is to work alongside other representatives to help build the path towards a healthy and sustainable society.

The pressures of parliament make this more challenging, but being aware of our own biases, and the sometimes sub-optimal decision making processes that can accompany them, can help avoid missteps along the way. Psychologically informed policy-making provides a way of doing this effectively. Because, if there's one thing that psychologists aim to understand, it's people: who we are, why we think the way we do, how we feel, and where those feelings come from.

Trust in politicians and politics has been on the decline while the importance of identity and relationships has never been greater.[15] Issues of trust and relations cut across society at large, but also policy-making. We need to think about how policies can make us feel, how legislation changes environments, and the impact these changes have on our relationships – both at the personal and societal level.

Starting from the question of what policies can lead to the rebuilding of trust, tackling isolation and fostering strong relationships are the first steps towards building a good society. These are thorny topics without easy answers, but thankfully psychology has been thinking about them for decades.

Understanding our psychology and the psychology of those we serve empowers us to deliver effective policy-solutions while ensuring that we are really putting people first.

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