



This postprint was originally published by Cambridge University Press as:

Hertwig, R. (2023). **The real cause of our complicity: The preoccupation with human weakness.** *Behavioural and Brain Sciences*, 46: e161. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X23000936>

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The Real Cause of Our Complicity: The Preoccupation with Human Weakness

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ABSTRACT

Chater and Loewenstein (C&L) offer an incisive criticism of how behavioral sciences and public policy have become complicit with corporations in blaming public health and societal problems on individual weaknesses, thus deflecting support away from systemic reforms. However, their analysis stops short of holding the field to account in one important respect: its preoccupation with human irrationality and weakness.

Chater and Loewenstein (C&L) offer an insightful analysis of contemporary behavioral public policy. In many respects, I agree with them. Corporations and entire industries, driven by the relentless pursuit of profit maximization, have played a key role in creating numerous public health crises and societal problems: the obesity, diabetes, and opioid epidemics, widespread climate change denial, and a tsunami of misinformation, to name but a few. The big players' tactics have been chronicled in numerous eye-opening publications on topics such as Big Food (Stuckler & Nestle, 2012), Big Soda (e.g., Nestle, 2015), Big Pharma (e.g., Meier, 2018; Whitaker, 2010), and Big Tech (Zuboff, 2019). C&L (p. 25) also give credit to earlier observers (e.g., public health scholar Kelley Brownell) for calling out the corporations' strategy of "consistently cast[ing] societal problems as issues of individual weakness and responsibility, the solutions to which involve 'fixing' individual behavior" (p. 5).

It turns out that by focusing on individual behavior and overlooking systemic factors, behavioral public policy has played into the hands of the corporations. Why has the field not noticed its complicity? C&L touch on some reasons. They seem to suggest that even

behavioral scientists have succumbed to the fundamental attribution error, the tendency to overestimate the influence of individual factors on people's behavior while underestimating the influence of situational or environmental factors (p. 7). Furthermore, behavioral scientists' focus on "frailties of thought and behavior as the source of problems" (p. 11) seems to dispose them to believe that the solutions lie in interventions that address those individual frailties—especially if those interventions can be touted as more efficient and politically palatable than systemic policies.

In my view, C&L do not get quite to the heart of the matter. For decades, behavioral decision science and behavioral economics have not just 'focused' on cognitive and motivational frailties, but been unhealthily preoccupied by them. Much of the field has subscribed to a single narrative, popularized in a nutshell as "human beings are fallible: lazy, stupid, greedy and weak" (The Economist, 2008). Propelled by the findings of the heuristics-and-biases program, behavioral scientists have drawn dire conclusions about human reasoning and rationality: People "lack the correct programs for many important judgmental tasks" (Slovic et al., 1976, p. 174), and "mental illusions should be considered the rule rather than the exception" (Thaler, 1991, p. 4). The capacity for individual self-control has also been slammed: "... nearly every major personal and social problem affecting large numbers of modern citizens involves some kind of failure of self-regulation, albeit in the context of broader social influences" (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004, p. 3). What those broader influences might be, the authors failed to specify. For decades, the behavioral sciences have provided the perfect backdrop for corporations to blame problems on individual weakness rather than on systemic factors.

To understand why behavioral public policy seems to have become the accomplice of corporate interests, we first need to confront what Lopes (1991, p. 65) called the field's

“rhetoric of irrationality.” Moving beyond this blinkered approach would allow us to see that the field’s dire conclusions about human reasoning and rationality ignore both past and present lines of research that arrived at very different conclusions about human competences (see also Lejarraga & Hertwig, 2021); that many behavioral scientists appear to be drawn to human weaknesses, citing articles that report poor performance on average some six times more often than articles that report good performance (Christensen-Szalanski & Beach, 1984); and that this infatuation with the negatives of human cognition may make it difficult to acknowledge recent findings that go against the alleged stability and universality of foundational biases such as loss aversion (e.g., Gal & Rucker, 2018; Yechiam & Hochman, 2013). Second, we need to acknowledge that individual failings of self-control have been diagnosed in the broader context of consumer products and environments often hyper-designed to trigger addictive behaviors—to unhealthy food and beverages (e.g., Brownell & Gold, 2012; O’Connor, 2021), digital media (see Kozyreva et al., 2020), and more. Third, the obsession with individual frailties, combined with the belief that they cannot be corrected, appears to prevent many behavioral public policymakers from exploring other interventions, such as “boosting” interventions. These aim to build on people’s competences or develop new ones while preserving their liberty and promoting their agency (Hertwig & Grüne-Yanoff, 2017; Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2020). Granted, boosting interventions also focus on the individual. But they typically do not blame harmful behaviors on insurmountable individual weaknesses and are not seen as stand-alone solutions, but as one of several complementary entry points for policy interventions (see Kozyreva et al., 2020). Indeed, boosting interventions may also be systemic—compulsory education may be the most successful s-frame boosting intervention ever. I believe that such competence-enhancing interventions are urgently needed for a range of reasons. Let me mention just two. First, s-frame interventions such as regulation and taxation cannot help but lag behind the rapid progress of many technologies. Digital platforms can, for instance, change key parameters of their algorithms or

choice architectures overnight. Individuals need to be empowered to retain autonomy when regulation will not protect them (yet). Second, key s-frame interventions such as mandates or taxes are not infrequently politically unfeasible. For instance, very few countries imposed Covid-19 vaccine mandates on their populations.

To conclude, C&L offer a persuasive analysis of the role of behavioral sciences in reinforcing the i-frame perspective and thus “inadvertently” (p. 34) helping corporations to oppose s-frame reforms. In one important regard, however, they stop short of holding the field to account. It is not just the focus on individual-level solutions that has led behavioral public policy astray, but—at least equally importantly—the fixation on cognitive and behavioral failings, the rhetoric of irrationality, and the one-sided picture of humanity we have drawn.

12. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS STATEMENT (optional) (separate from conflict of interest and funding statements)

None

13. COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

14. FUNDING STATEMENT

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

15. ALPHABETICAL REFERENCE LIST (APA STANDARD)

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