



UBC Briefing 2: Choosing behaviours to target

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Problems that require behaviour change are often complex in that: 1) many different behaviours may need to change to achieve a solution, 2) many different people, groups or organisations may be involved, and 3) these behaviours and features of their context typically interact in complex ways. *Deciding what behaviours to target is a crucial first step in solving a behaviour change problem.*

For example, if the goal is to reduce prevalence of obesity among children in a school, it is crucial to assess how far this can be achieved by promoting a change in eating and/or an increase in physical activity. Within this it is necessary to assess what might be feasible but potent changes in either of these broad types of behaviour in the key actors (e.g. reducing portion sizes, changing choice of food types, reducing snacking on the part of the children; altering provision or composition of packed lunches on the part of carers; altering menus offered by school catering staff). It is also necessary to consider how any given change may result in compensatory behaviours by the same or other actors (e.g. children buying more sweets to make up for restrictions in choice of foods from the school catering staff).

Map relevant behaviours

One starts by mapping *the behavioural system* within which the problem sits. This involves identifying who are the key actors and what are their relevant behaviours? Actors can include family members, members of the workforce, service commissioners, planners, policy-makers, industry decision-makers etc. as well as those whose behaviour one is ultimately interested in changing. This boils down to two key questions:

1. *Who needs to do what differently? (including when and how?)*
2. *What other behaviours are involved in supporting or impeding this change?*

One then goes on to identify causal pathways between the behaviours, within and between people. This can include specification of places where behaviours occur. There are many free online tools for drawing causal maps. It is highly recommended to use one of these to help structure one's thinking.

This exercise can be informed by a range of data sources that may be available or may need to be

sought. These include observation, interviews, workshops and literature reviews. Including a variety of stakeholder perspectives helps to bring about a common understanding of the problem and is likely to produce a more accurate picture.

Influences may be non-linear, involve positive and negative feedback loops, and change over time.

Causal maps with different actors, involving different behaviours with non-linear positive and negative feedback loops can quickly become very complex and so it is generally necessary to simplify them to make them tractable. In doing so, however, it is important to keep a record of all the simplifying decisions and the reasons for making them, so that the map can be redrawn if necessary.

Identify the entry point

Having mapped the problem as a behavioural system, the next step is to choose where to intervene. This requires making a judgment about which behaviour/s of which individual/s are likely to be most productive to target in the first instance to bring about the desired change. Identifying the 'entry point' is helped by considering the following in relation to the possible options:

1. *What is the likely impact of changing x?*
2. *How easy is it likely to be to change x with the resources available?*
3. *What are the likely knock-on effects (positive and negative) of changing x in the system?*

Common mistakes in choosing target behaviours are:

1. Choosing ones that are attractive to key stakeholders but have little or no impact on the problem
2. Failing to take account of compensatory changes in other parts of the behavioural system
3. Setting behavioural goals that are unachievable rather than building on small but achievable steps
4. Focusing exclusively on the people whose behaviour one ultimately wants to change and not considering other key actors in the behavioural system

Reading: *Pinho, H. Ch 5: Generation of Systems Map in El-Sayed, A.M. & Galea, S. (2017) Systems Science and Population Health, Oxford University Press.*