COMMENT TRAVEL BEHAVIOUR

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Does transport policy need a nudge?

Spending on transport programmes that focus on influencing the brains of travellers, rather than infrastructure, can be effective

People are strange. They do what they do for all sorts of reasons. Or often reasoning has nothing do with it. They do what they do because of emotions, habits, instincts. They certainly don't behave like the economists say they should. You can't rely on them making a rational decision based on the information they have before them - as classical economics would have us construct our world around. Or as one of the chief gurus of 'nudge' theories (of which more later), Professor Richard Thaler of the University of Chicago, says: "Economists assume people have brains like supercomputers that can solve anything. But human minds are more like really old Apple Macs with slow processing speeds and prone to frequent crashes."

This applies to travel decisions too. Transport planning is largely based on the assumption that people will want to travel by the route that gets them there quickest. We plan infrastructure and provide services on that basis. But in reality the pursuit of the fastest way of getting from A to B is not the only neural pathway lighting up when people make travel decisions. There's cost of course. But there's also an alphabet soup of considerations whirling around in there.

People may drive the kids to school (or not) primarily because it extends family time. They might not consider taking a job in one town when they live in another because that's not what their peer group or family group do. They might go on the same bus route even

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though it's slow and indirect because they are familiar with where it stops, and going a more direct and unknown way makes them feel anxious. People don't like to feel anxious. People also don't like to feel stupid or scared or out of place. All sorts of cultural, social and psychological factors can come into play.

You might not feel safe in another urban 'manor', you might hate having to ask about how the ticketing system works, you might not like travelling through tunnels, you might not like being surrounded by suits, grannies, men or people you consider your social inferiors or superiors. You might think that people like me travel on this mode of transport and not that mode of transport. You might be subject to a collective conservatism. You might like staring out of the top floor windows of double deckers or a later, slower train with elbow room.

People like pleasure. They trade it off with utility - minutes saved versus minutes enjoyed. You might go the scenic way round, the way you can get a seat, the way that you can get some work done or recharge your phone, or which means you can go to that café you

"Economists assume people have brains like supercomputers ... But human minds are more like really old Apple Macs" like, the pleasingly obscure way. The way that beats the system. You might cycle it or walk it instead - it's a nice day after all. Time passes faster in higher quality environments so a journey that's shorter in clock time can seem longer in the human mind if it's uncomfortable and stressful. So what do conventional time savings mean then? Sometimes none of these considerations come into play because the mind's on automatic - this is how I always do this journey. And sometimes of course for a particular journey there are very few options available (other than for the very time rich or very awkward). People are complicated. They are human beings not zeros and ones that behave rationally in a computer model.

Even if people were the rational consumers of classical economics - which they aren't. They often aren't the informed consumers of classical economics either. For example research on the Underground found that many travelers are infrequent, inexperienced and may make irrational decisions. Many of them want to improve their journey (but not 'take one for the team'). On the Tube two in three customers would make changes to improve their journey experience if they could. To the extent that basic information provision for passengers about when the rush hour was on the Underground (ie. telling passengers what the busiest quarter hours at a particular station were) led to a shift out of those busiest periods of 5-6%. I would have thought that people wouldn't need telling when the rush hour was on the Tube but ignorance and a desire to avoid overcrowded Tube trains meets information and hey presto!

More extensive and sophisticated campaigns around managing disruption associated with improvements to the system have also proved their worth. For example, the withdrawal of the Victoria Line from Seven Sisters to Walthamstow Central and a reduced service on the rest of the line is enough to bring out any line controller in a cold sweat - or a hot sweat for passengers given it took place in August 2015. But through close coordination with operational teams and modeling the potential impacts on passenger flows, followed through by deploying a battery of communications to passengers, from social media to posters, led to high awareness by passengers, positive feedback, a stable pattern of behaviour change and a reduction in

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demand across the whole line. Scaling this up and going sideways from managing operational issues, behaviour change programmes in London have reduced car travel on the school run by 6% on average, taking 22 million vehicle km per year out of the morning peak, whilst the Olympics saw more than 75% of Londoners change their travel behaviour.

All of which shows that we may be strange and frequently irrational but we can be nudged. A few years ago nudge policies were all the rage among policy wonks and politicians - so much so that the Cameron government set up a behavioural insights team (also known as the 'nudge' unit) which now lives on as a private company. Nudge has been defined as something that alters people's behaviour in a predictable way without forbidding any options. To count as nudge, an intervention must be easy and cheap, but hard to avoid. Nudges are not instructions. Putting fruit at eye level counts as a nudge. Banning junk food does not. One of the most frequently cited nudges is the etching of the image of a housefly into the men's room urinals at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, which is intended to 'improve the aim'. It could be argued that politicians liked nudge because it triangulated between both left and right. It achieved progressive ends without the costs and compulsion that conservatives abhor.

So what are some of the implications of the record of nudge, travel demand management and behavioural economics for urban transport so far? I would say that when done right spending on transport programmes that focus on influencing the brains of travellers (rather than the infrastructure those travellers use) can be effective. Indeed we need more of them because it's a relatively cheap, rapid and cost effective way to have happier, healthier people using our transport systems in a more efficient way. But the complexities of human behaviour means they need to be well thought through, well implemented and learn the lessons of previous successes and failures. Not always easy when capital spending is seen by government as good but the revenue spending (that among other things supports behavioural change programmes) is bad. All exacerbated by the assumption that Whitehall knows best how local government should spend revenue which is through short life projects which may or may not win ministerial funding contests. Not a good way to retain and build institutional



memory and capacity for the long haul.

Another thought, if before long we live in a world of open data on information and fares which various third party parties will aggregate through single interfaces to travellers, then the rational side of travellers' brains will soon be fully informed as to all the choices and costs involved in going from A to B. It will all instantly available to them on their smart device. But these apps aren't going to catch the attention of the irrational side of the brain - which is no good at words and numbers at the best of times. Nor the social, cultural or the unique quirks that individuate us all. They also aren't going to be so interested in nudging people into making choices that are better for their health or the

health of the city they live in.

Could this be where transport authorities, planners and providers focus on in the future? Thinking through how vehicles, streets, interchanges, signage, information, messaging and the system as a whole relate to how people really think and feel. In short does transport planning and policy need a nudge?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan Bray is the director of the Urban Transport Group. Throughout his career in policy and lobbying roles he has been at the frontline in bringing about more effective, sustainable and equitable transport policies.

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