

The Influence of Private Interests on Research in Behavioural Public Policy: A System-Level Problem

Commentary on target article: Nick Chater and George Loewenstein. 'The i-frame and the s-frame: How focusing on the individual-level solutions has led behavioral public policy astray', *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* (2023)

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Abstract:

Chater and Loewenstein argue that i-frame research has been co-opted by private interests opposed to system-level reform, leading to ineffective interventions. They recommend that behavioural scientists refocus on system-level interventions. We suggest that the influence of private interests on research is highly problematic for wider normative and epistemic reasons. A system-level intervention to shield research from private influence is needed.

Main Text:

We offer a philosophical perspective on this important programmatic article, focussing on three related constructive critiques and suggestions.

Our first point focuses on the background normative framework for policy evaluation. Following the majority of work in this area, Chater and Loewenstein primarily evaluate policies in terms of how effectively they promote welfare. They present a range of evidence that i-frame interventions often fail to benefit their targets, relative to s-frame alternatives. This forms the basis of their central critique of the i-frame agenda, which they argue has been co-opted and exploited by private interests opposed to s-frame reforms.

This is a powerful line of criticism. Welfare promotion is obviously one extremely important dimension of public policy evaluation. If i-frame interventions yield meagre welfare gains, that is a good reason to oppose them and the private influence that promotes them. But welfare is not the only dimension of evaluation. Alongside maximising human welfare, we also care about a plurality of other goods, such as fairness, equality, prioritising the worst off, as well as democratic values. Crucially, we are often prepared to trade-off some degree of welfare-promotion for the sake of these other values (few of us are full-blown utilitarians). This is important because advocates of i-frame interventions (such as 'nudge' proponents) often appeal to non-welfarist values, such as liberty and autonomy, in defence of an i-frame approach. So, a complete normative evaluation will need to compare i-frame and s-frame interventions in terms of a plurality of values.

More positively, we want to suggest that Chater and Loewenstein's welfare-based critique of i-frame interventions (and the private influence behind them) may be bolstered by reflecting on these wider values. To illustrate, consider two plausible (and non-exclusive) ways of understanding

the value of democracy. On one view, democracy is valuable because it gives citizens control over their collective lives, thereby promoting their autonomy (Lovett and Zuehl, 2022). On another view, the value of democracy inheres in the fact that it gives citizens similar levels of political influence, thereby avoiding objectionably inegalitarian social relations (Christiano, 2008; Viehoff, 2014; Kolodny, 2014). If, as Chater and Loewenstein persuasively argue, i-frame interventions are a means by which private interests exert influence on public policy, this plausibly undermines the values of democratic autonomy and equality (Lovett ms; Christiano, 2012; Bartels, 2016:ch.11). When private actors are able to leverage their wealth to influence policy-making, this both undermines regular citizens' control over policy decisions (thereby undermining their autonomy) and places them in a subordinate relationship to the wealthy (thereby undermining equality). Hence, the case against private influence over public policy need not be restricted to its effects on welfare. Chater and Loewenstein's critique of the i-frame research agenda can be waged on multiple fronts.

Our second point is that private influence not only comes with normative disadvantages, but has also been shown to be epistemically harmful in a variety of contexts. Chater and Loewenstein's critique focuses on how private interests can affect which research questions are asked, and what studies are thus carried out and how they are adapted for policies. However, private influence penetrates deeper, often affecting the actual results of whatever research is carried out and thus how the research questions are answered. For instance, it is a well-known problem in pharmaceutical research that researchers with industry ties are much more likely to produce studies that draw pro-industry conclusions, even without any obvious biasing of the research methods used (see e.g. Lexchin et al, 2003). These effects on study results are part of a well-studied suite of mechanisms by which industry influence has subverted the scientific pursuit of truth. These include deliberate (and very subtle) strategies designed to maintain ignorance (Pinto 2017) or to sustain self-serving consensus that may diverge from the best evidence (Holman & Bruner 2015).

Take, for example, a tactic from the tobacco industry's war on cancer research (Orestes & Conway 2011) which is evidently still in operation today (Adams 2011). Industry conducts proprietary meta-research into which methods are reliable and which not. With this knowledge in hand they fund less reliable research that investigates (matters pertinent to) policies they wish to subvert. They hence prevent consensus forming simply by ensuring enough erroneous results are disseminated to perpetuate academic debate (Weatherall et al 2020). Importantly, these strategies for directly influencing and perverting the process and outcomes of scientific inquiry will be available to private interests whether the research questions pertain to s-frame or i-frame interventions.

Finally, in light of these wider problems with private influence (and the subtle and subversive ways in which it operates) we believe the solutions suggested by Chater and Loewenstein are insufficient. They propose that "behavioral scientists need to be aware of, and actively counter, any tendency to view i-frame interventions as alternatives to system change" (Chater and Loewenstein 2023, 9). This is fleshed out primarily in terms of understanding and reversing the ways private interests exploit human psychology (p. 31) and ensuring the methods used are conducive to discoveries pertinent to s-frame policies (p. 32). Somewhat ironically, these recommendations have a rather i-frame flavour: give researchers information and encourage them to make better individual choices.

And for that reason, they cannot hope to counter the systematic ways in which private interests bias not only the choice of interventions to study and implement, but also the outcomes of research. Moreover, the methods and results of industry science are often proprietary and not shared with the broader community (Bright & Heesen 2023). Industry may thus have more information about how to exploit human psychology than outsiders, further undermining the efficacy of Chater and Loewenstein's proposed solution. We suggest — turning the article's main contention back on itself — that we should also consider s-frame interventions that target the research field. First and foremost: what can be done to better shield research from the influence of private interests?

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