Why Behavioral Science Has Become the Next Big Thing for Solving Societyâ€
by Chris Peak

Ever since Dr. Stanley Milgram conducted his notorious experiment in the early 1960s, in which he asked participants to obediently administer a high-voltage "shock" to a victim, researchers have uncovered a wealth of fascinating insights into the human mind. But much of this study has been confined to laboratories and academia. As managing director at ideas42, NationSwell Council member Alissa Fishbane is bucking that trend by applying the lessons from behavioral science to the social sector. At ideas42, her team advises governments and nonprofits about how to better structure their programs in education, healthcare, criminal justice, finance and energy based on what we know about human psychology. NationSwell spoke to Fishbane at her office in Lower Manhattan.

What is behavioral science, and why is it so important for policymakers to understand?
Behavioral sciences are really pulling together all the research in social psychology, neuroscience and behavioral economics. This field is so important because people often behave in ways that are strange and peculiar. You want to go to the gym five times a week, you want to stay on this diet and you want to save more for retirement. Why isn't that happening? We all tell ourselves what we want to do, then it doesn't quite happen. Why not? We as human beings struggle to follow through on certain decisions, particularly things that are very important to us. But programs and policies in the social sector are often created in ways that don't account for this fundamental aspect, how we behave as humans. That's really where we come in.

What's an example of how this looks in practice?
One thing we're looking at is how to help students complete college. There's been a lot of great work in this area, but we've taken a different approach, which is the holistic student experience. How do we take the pulse of a student as they go through the process, day-to-day and semester-to-semester? How do we understand their various decisions, actions, habits? Knowing that there are constant hurdles a student needs to jump over — "Did I apply? Did I matriculate? Did I get my aid? Did I study? Did I pass?" — even a small one can trip them up. The solution isn't any one piece; it's creating a system that supports them throughout all of their college years.

It can be very simple, like reminders to complete the FAFSA. With something that small, we almost doubled the early application rate at one university we worked with. We also take on tougher problems, like working with a college to figure out how to keep students from dropping out in the first year. We realized a big part of the problem for students was feeling like they didn't belong on campus. For that, we embedded a video into orientation showing how lots of other students went through similar challenges, the way they overcame them and how thrilled they are now to be there. We were able to raise the retention rate from 83 to 91 percent, which is pretty amazing, just by understanding what these students experienced.

What kinds of issues have you worked on locally, in New York City?

Summons are tickets for low-level infractions that people get for things like having an open container of alcohol in public or riding a bike on the sidewalk. Lots of people are getting these tickets — big city, you know, lots going on — but what's really scary is that if you get a ticket and don't show up to court, a bench warrant is put out for you. The next time you have any sort of encounter with police, you will be arrested immediately and put in jail. Almost 40 percent of New Yorkers aren't showing up, which is an extraordinarily high number. That's really concerning because for families that don't have flexible jobs, it's hugely disruptive. Even if you're out in 24 hours, you could lose your job. And it's even worse if you're undocumented.

We partnered with the mayor's office, the NYPD and a state entity, the Office of Court Administration, to change what the ticket looks like. Even changing the title makes it clearer. Before it said "Complaint/Information"; now, it says "Criminal Court Appearance Ticket." Instead of a date and time in chicken-scratch on the back, that info is now at the top along with writing that says that you will get an arrest warrant if you don't show up.

Then, their next touch point is 12 weeks later. Most people think they have plenty of time, but they forget, lose the ticket or don't put the date in their calendar. We're coupling the revised form with a series of text-message reminders. We know people need to ask for time off work, so it comes a week ahead of time to help them plan. In case they forgot, it comes three days before. Then, it comes the day before.

Information in the earlier version of the New York Police Department summons (right) was scattered, leading many people to miss court dates. The new version (left) clearly indicates when and where a person needs to go.Courtesy of NYC.gov

Are there any ethical dilemmas to watch out for in applying behavioral research to policy?

No matter how you design anything, consciously or unconsciously, you create an outcome. The way anything is built, just in its structure, is nudging people one way or another. We try to de-bias that and help people make the decision they want to be making. In the social sector, we're really focused on how we help people move from intention to action. So we're not trying to tell people, "Now, do this," but rather, helping them follow through.

How do you apply these insights to your own life?

We don't realize everything else that's going on in the lives of others; we don't see the full picture of anyone's environment. It's easy to say, "I can't believe you didn't make it to the gym five times," but then you don't either. I can make these assumptions like, "Oh, she doesn't have discipline," but then come up with an excuse for my own lack of discipline. Understanding human behavior makes us more generous about others and ourselves. I've become much more forgiving of myself, knowing that lots of these things are funny quirks about human behavior.