



THE IMPACT OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE ON BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS AND PUBLIC POLICY

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Integrating Indigenous knowledge into behavioural economics and public policy has the potential to redefine governance frameworks by providing different perspectives on human behaviour, decision-making, and sustainability. Indigenous societies have long established sophisticated knowledge systems that value ecological stewardship, social harmony, and long-term intergenerational well-being. This is in contrast to Western behavioural economics, which traditionally focuses on individual choice, direct results, and quantitative data. Indigenous cultures' holistic, community-centered methods might improve the implementation of Cass Sunstein's behavioural insights in public policy, notably through nudges and risk regulation. Indigenous knowledge systems frequently promote communal responsibility, sustainability, and relational approaches to environmental and social concerns, which may inspire policy on climate change, health, and resource management. However, it is difficult to connect Western, economically oriented frameworks with Indigenous traditions since their values, decision-making processes, and the importance of individual vs community action differ. This article investigates the possibility of combining Indigenous knowledge with behavioural economics, specifically if nudging and other behavioural methods may be modified to respect Indigenous sovereignty and knowledge systems. It also explores the ethical implications of incorporating Indigenous knowledge into policy frameworks that frequently ignore the cultural, spiritual, and non-quantifiable components of these systems. Finally, incorporating Indigenous knowledge into behavioural policy may result in more inclusive, sustainable, and culturally respectful governance structures, promoting better long-term results for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

Keywords: *Indigenous Knowledge, Behavioural Economics, Public Policy, Sustainability, Cultural Sensitivity, Environmental Governance*

Introduction

Indigenous knowledge refers to the traditional knowledge systems developed and passed down through generations within Indigenous communities. This knowledge encompasses a wide range of domains, including agriculture, natural resource management, medicine, cultural practices, and social organization. It is deeply connected to the land, environment, and local customs, often representing a holistic understanding of the world. Indigenous knowledge is typically transmitted orally and is rooted in a close relationship with the natural environment, focusing on sustainability, community well-being, and intergenerational wisdom (Battiste, 2005). This knowledge is context-specific, shaped by the unique experiences of Indigenous peoples in their respective environments.

Overview of Behavioral Economics

Behavioral economics is a subfield of economics that integrates insights from psychology to understand how individuals make economic decisions. Traditional economics often assumes that people are rational actors who make decisions based on maximizing utility, but behavioral economics recognizes that individuals frequently make decisions influenced by biases, emotions, and social factors. Key concepts in behavioral economics include bounded rationality, which refers to the limited cognitive capacity of individuals, and heuristics, which are mental shortcuts used to make decisions more efficiently (Kahneman, 2011). Behavioral economics seeks to explain why people may act in ways that diverge from rational economic models, such as exhibiting overconfidence, loss aversion, or herd behavior.

Connection between Indigenous Knowledge and Behavioral Economics

The intersection between Indigenous knowledge and behavioral economics lies in their shared understanding of human behavior within a broader social and ecological context. Indigenous knowledge often emphasizes community-oriented decision-making, long-term sustainability, and cooperation, which align with key principles of behavioral economics, such as social norms and reciprocity. For example, Indigenous approaches to resource management, which stress the importance of collective action and future generations, mirror behavioral economic insights into how individuals consider long-term rewards and the social impact of their decisions (Gavin et al., 2015). Both fields highlight the importance of trust, social relationships, and the influence of environmental context on decision-making.

Principles of Indigenous Knowledge

A core principle of Indigenous knowledge is its holistic perspective, which sees all elements of life as interconnected. Indigenous worldviews emphasize that humans, nature, and the spiritual realm are deeply intertwined and cannot be understood in isolation. This holistic approach contrasts with reductionist views often found in Western thought, which tend to separate elements into distinct categories. For example, Indigenous knowledge systems encompass the physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of life, seeing them as a unified whole. This approach is evident in traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), where the health of ecosystems, cultural practices, and community well-being are seen as inseparable (Berkes, 2012). This interconnectedness fosters a deeper respect for the environment, emphasizing that the well-being of humans and the natural world are mutually dependent.

Community-Oriented Decision Making

Indigenous knowledge is fundamentally rooted in community-oriented decision-making processes. Decisions are often made collectively, taking into account the needs, traditions, and values of the community, as well as the input of elders and other respected members. This contrasts with individualistic decision-making models often seen in Western systems, where personal autonomy is prioritized. In many Indigenous societies, knowledge is shared through oral traditions, with elders passing down wisdom that has been honed through generations of experience. Decision-making is typically inclusive, with an emphasis on consensus-building and the involvement of all community members, ensuring that diverse perspectives are considered (Smith, 2012). This collective approach helps ensure that the decisions reflect the needs of the entire community and that future generations' interests are safeguarded.

Sustainability and Ecological Balance

Sustainability and ecological balance are central to Indigenous knowledge systems. Indigenous communities have long managed their environments with an emphasis on long-term sustainability, focusing on maintaining the health and vitality of ecosystems over time. Indigenous people often practice sustainable land-use techniques, such as crop rotation, controlled burns, and the protection of sacred natural sites, all designed to preserve biodiversity and ecosystem services. These practices are grounded in a deep understanding of local environments and are passed down through generations. In many cases, Indigenous communities have developed intricate systems of resource management that minimize waste and avoid depletion, ensuring that resources are available for future generations (Gavin et al., 2015). The concept of balance within the natural world is often encapsulated in the idea that humans are stewards rather than owners of the land, a perspective that fosters respect and care for the environment.

Behavioral Economics

Behavioral economics is a field that blends economics with psychology to better understand how people make decisions. Traditional economics often assumes that individuals act rationally, making choices that maximize their utility or benefit based on complete information. However, behavioral economics challenges this assumption by recognizing that human decision-making is not always rational. People often make decisions based on emotions, social influences, and cognitive limitations, rather than strict calculations of utility. This approach highlights the complexities of human behavior and emphasizes the importance of context, framing, and psychological factors in shaping economic outcomes (Thaler, 2000). For example, consumers might make suboptimal choices, such as spending more on products due to the influence of advertising, or failing to save adequately for retirement because of short-term gratification.

Bounded Rationality

One of the central concepts in behavioral economics is bounded rationality, a term coined by psychologist Herbert Simon. Bounded rationality suggests that humans are limited in their cognitive abilities and access to information, which affects their decision-making. Rather than being able to evaluate every possible option in an optimal way, individuals are constrained by their cognitive limits and the time available for making decisions (Simon, 1957). Consequently, people often rely on simplified decision-making processes that may not lead to the best outcome but are manageable given the constraints they face. For example, a consumer may not conduct extensive research before making a purchase, instead relying on brand recognition or past experiences as a shortcut to decision-making. Bounded rationality illustrates how even well-intentioned individuals may make imperfect choices, and that economic models based on rational decision-making fail to capture the complexity of real-world behaviors.

Heuristics and Biases in Decision-Making

Heuristics are mental shortcuts or rules of thumb that individuals use to make decisions quickly and with minimal cognitive effort. Behavioral economics emphasizes the study of these biases, which can significantly impact decision-making and economic behavior. Some well-known heuristics include availability, representativeness, and anchoring.

- **Availability Heuristic**
This occurs when individuals make judgments based on information that is most readily available to them, often influenced by recent experiences or media coverage. For instance, after hearing about a plane crash in the news, people may overestimate the likelihood of flying, even though air travel is statistically safe (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973).
- **Representativeness Heuristic**
This is when people judge the probability of an event based on how similar it is to a prototype, often overlooking relevant statistical information. For example, a person might assume that a well-dressed individual is more likely to be wealthy, even though wealth and appearance may not always align (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).
- **Anchoring Bias**
This occurs when individuals rely too heavily on the first piece of information they receive (the "anchor") when making decisions. For instance, if the initial price of a product is set high, consumers may perceive a discount as more significant, even if the actual value of the product is lower than expected (Epley & Gilovich, 2001).

These biases demonstrate that human decision-making is often not as rational or objective as traditional economic models suggest. Instead, individuals are influenced by cognitive shortcuts that can lead to errors in judgment and suboptimal decisions. Behavioral economics seeks to understand these patterns of behavior and incorporate them into economic models to better predict real-world outcomes.

Integration of Indigenous Knowledge in Behavioral Economics

Indigenous knowledge systems have developed sophisticated methods for dealing with risk and uncertainty, often grounded in a deep understanding of local ecosystems, social structures, and historical patterns. Unlike conventional economic models, which tend to focus on quantifiable risk and statistical probabilities, Indigenous approaches are more holistic, incorporating long-term observations and the interplay of environmental, social, and spiritual factors. For instance, Indigenous peoples often practice resource management strategies such as controlled burns or rotational agriculture to mitigate the risks of natural disasters or resource depletion (Berkes, 2012). These practices demonstrate a nuanced approach to uncertainty – recognizing that unpredictability is inherent in life but can be managed through adaptive strategies that balance human needs with ecological health. In behavioral economics, this Indigenous way of managing risk resonates with concepts like bounded rationality, where decision-makers are not fully informed but rely on local knowledge, experience, and social learning to navigate uncertainty (Gavin et al., 2015).

Trust, Reciprocity, and Social Norms in Decision-Making

Trust and reciprocity are fundamental components of decision-making within Indigenous communities, influencing both individual and collective actions. In many Indigenous cultures, the principles of reciprocity and mutual aid are central to social organization, guiding interactions within communities and with the natural environment. For example, Indigenous knowledge often emphasizes sharing resources and supporting the welfare of others, even at a personal cost, under the understanding that these actions will be reciprocated in the future (McMichael, 2011). These social norms help foster cooperation and stability, creating networks of trust that allow communities to thrive. In behavioral economics, these ideas align with the concept of social capital and the role of social norms in guiding economic behavior. People often make decisions based on their expectations of how others will behave, with trust and reciprocity forming the foundation for cooperation, even in complex and uncertain environments (Fehr & Gächter, 2000).

Long-Term vs. Short-Term Thinking

Indigenous knowledge systems often prioritize long-term thinking over immediate gains, a perspective rooted in the recognition of the interconnectedness between generations, communities, and the environment. For example, many Indigenous practices emphasize sustainability, ensuring that resources are used in a way that does not compromise future generations' ability to meet their needs (Berkes, 2012). This long-term view contrasts with the often-short-term focus found in modern economic systems, which prioritize immediate profits or consumption. Behavioral economics acknowledges that individuals tend to favor short-term rewards due to cognitive biases, such as temporal discounting, where people devalue future benefits in favor of immediate gratification (Ainslie, 2001). Indigenous approaches challenge this bias by promoting a mindset that values the future, encouraging decisions that benefit both current and future generations.

Influence on Public Policy

Indigenous knowledge has a profound impact on community-based policies, particularly in areas like natural resource management, environmental protection, and social welfare. Indigenous practices often prioritize collective well-being, sustainability, and the long-term preservation of the environment, offering a rich source of insights for policy development. In many cases, these community-based approaches focus on local participation, ensuring that decisions are made by those directly

affected by the policies. For instance, Indigenous communities have long practiced sustainable land and water management techniques, such as agroforestry and rotational farming, which have been integrated into modern conservation efforts (Berkes, 2012). This focus on local, participatory governance and sustainability aligns with the growing recognition that successful environmental and social policies require community involvement and respect for local knowledge. Indigenous practices, such as communal land stewardship and resource sharing, provide valuable frameworks for creating more inclusive and effective public policies (Gavin et al., 2015).

Challenges in Mainstream Policy Adoption

While the integration of Indigenous knowledge into public policy holds great promise, significant challenges remain in adopting these practices within mainstream policy frameworks. One major obstacle is the dominance of Western knowledge systems and economic models, which often marginalize or overlook Indigenous perspectives. In many cases, policy-makers may not recognize the value of Indigenous knowledge, or they may view it as incompatible with modern state governance (McGregor, 2004). Additionally, the historical and ongoing impacts of colonization have created mistrust between Indigenous communities and governmental institutions, making it difficult for Indigenous knowledge to be included in policy-making processes. Legal and political barriers, such as land ownership rights and sovereignty issues, can also prevent the incorporation of traditional practices into national policies. Overcoming these challenges requires greater recognition of the legitimacy and relevance of Indigenous knowledge in addressing contemporary societal and environmental issues.

Case Studies of Indigenous Knowledge in Policy

There are several notable case studies where Indigenous knowledge has been integrated into public policy, demonstrating its potential for creating more sustainable and equitable outcomes. One example is the integration of traditional fire management practices in Australia's bushfire policies. Indigenous Australians have long used controlled burns to manage the landscape, reduce the risk of large fires, and maintain biodiversity. In recent years, fire management policies in Australia have begun to incorporate these traditional practices, leading to more effective and culturally respectful fire management strategies (Bradstock, 2010).

Another example is the inclusion of traditional ecological knowledge in fisheries management in Canada. Indigenous communities in the Pacific Northwest have collaborated with government agencies to create co-management systems for fisheries, integrating traditional fishing practices with modern scientific methods to ensure sustainable fish populations. This collaborative approach has helped bridge gaps between Indigenous knowledge and Western science, leading to more sustainable and culturally appropriate management practices.

Cultural Relevance in Policy Design

In an increasingly globalized world, effective policy design must recognize the diversity of cultural contexts to ensure it is both relevant and equitable. Tailoring policies to local cultural realities not only improve their efficacy but also promotes inclusivity and sustainability. This is particularly important when bridging Western economic theories, which often emphasize individualism and market-driven models, with Indigenous wisdom, which prioritizes community well-being, interconnectedness with nature, and long-term sustainability.

Adapting Policy to Local Cultural Contexts

Local cultural contexts shape how communities perceive and engage with policy, which means that policies based on one-size-fits-all frameworks can lead to unintended consequences or alienate certain groups. When policymakers fail to account for cultural differences, they risk undermining the effectiveness of their policies. For example, health interventions or education policies that disregard local traditions and languages may struggle to gain trust and participation from the target community. Conversely, policies that incorporate local knowledge, traditions, and values can foster greater community support and lead to more meaningful outcomes. This approach respects cultural diversity while ensuring that policies are both effective and contextually appropriate.

Bridging Western Economic Theories with Indigenous Wisdom

Western economic theories have long dominated global policy frameworks, often emphasizing individualism, profit maximization, and economic growth. While these theories have contributed to economic development in many parts of the world, they can sometimes overlook the social, environmental, and ethical implications of economic decisions. In contrast, Indigenous knowledge systems offer a more holistic approach, emphasizing sustainability, community cohesion, and stewardship of natural resources.

Integrating Indigenous wisdom into policy design can provide valuable insights into sustainable development, resource management, and social well-being. For example, Indigenous communities have long practiced sustainable land use and conservation techniques based on deep, place-based knowledge. Western policies that incorporate these practices, such as Indigenous land management strategies, can lead to more effective environmental conservation efforts. Additionally, the Indigenous concept of "caring for the land" can help policymakers design initiatives that emphasize long-term ecological health over short-term economic gain.

The integration of both perspectives can lead to more balanced, inclusive policies that consider not only economic growth but also cultural preservation and environmental sustainability. In practice, this might involve co-developing policies with Indigenous communities, recognizing their rights to self-determination, and respecting their governance systems.

The Role of Behavioral Economics in Indigenous Communities

Behavioral economics, which blends insights from psychology and economics, offers a valuable lens through which to understand decision-making and social behavior, particularly in Indigenous communities. Indigenous cultures often emphasize collective well-being, reciprocity, and sustainability – values that align well with the principles of behavioral economics. By integrating these insights with traditional practices, modern economic policies can help support Indigenous communities, enhancing both their economic resilience and social cohesion.

Supporting Traditional Practices with Modern Economic Insights

Traditional Indigenous practices; particularly those related to resource management and communal living, often involve strategies of long-term sustainability and collective responsibility. These practices are grounded in a deep understanding of local ecosystems, social structures, and the importance of maintaining balance with nature. However, when Indigenous communities interact with broader national or global economic systems, their practices may conflict with policies that emphasize individualism, short-term gain, or market-driven incentives.

Behavioral economics can help bridge this gap by offering tools to support decision-making that is in harmony with both traditional values and modern economic realities. For example, research in behavioral economics has shown that people are more likely to engage in pro-social behaviors (such as environmental conservation) when there are clear, communal benefits and when individuals feel a sense of shared identity or “social capital.” Indigenous communities often already have these communal bonds, and behavioral economics can provide insights into how policies might reinforce them.

One example is through “nudging,” a concept from behavioral economics that subtly influences individuals’ choices without restricting their freedom. By framing certain behaviors, such as sustainable farming or land management practices, as socially beneficial and incorporating them into local economic incentives, policymakers can encourage individuals to adhere to traditional practices that align with community values. This can support environmental sustainability while respecting the community’s cultural heritage.

Fostering Cooperative Behavior in Economic Policies

Indigenous communities often operate on a foundation of cooperation, shared responsibility, and collective decision-making. These values are crucial in managing common-pool resources, such as land, water, and forests. Behavioral economics can foster cooperative behavior by designing policies that leverage social norms, collective incentives, and group decision-making processes. For instance, policies that encourage cooperative investment in community projects, or that reward collective efforts to manage natural resources sustainably, can align with Indigenous social structures.

Additionally, framing economic choices in terms of community well-being rather than individual profit can help reinforce cooperative behavior. Studies in behavioral economics suggest that when individuals perceive that their actions contribute to the collective good, they are more likely to make decisions that benefit the community as a whole. Policies that incorporate these principles can empower Indigenous communities to manage resources sustainably, protect cultural practices, and foster economic resilience in the face of external pressures.

Conclusion

As global challenges such as climate change, economic inequality, and resource depletion continue to escalate, the integration of Indigenous knowledge with modern economic frameworks such as behavioral economics holds great promise for creating more inclusive, sustainable, and culturally relevant policies. The fusion of these two areas of thought offers a pathway for respecting traditional wisdom while addressing contemporary issues. In doing so, policymakers can develop solutions that are not only effective but also grounded in the social, cultural, and ecological realities of the communities they serve.

Behavioral economics provides a powerful toolkit for understanding the complexities of human decision-making, which often diverges from the rational, self-interested models proposed by classical economics. By incorporating insights from psychology, social norms, and cognitive biases, behavioral economics allows policymakers to design interventions that are more aligned with how people actually make choices. This is particularly important when considering Indigenous communities, whose cultural frameworks often emphasize collective well-being, stewardship of natural resources, and long-term sustainability.

Incorporating behavioral economics into policy design for Indigenous communities can help in crafting more effective interventions by understanding the role of community bonds, social capital, and shared goals in economic decision-making. Traditional Indigenous knowledge systems emphasize community-based approaches, where collective benefits and social norms play a crucial role in decision-making. Behavioral economics can complement these values by designing policies that nudge individuals toward cooperative behaviors, reinforcing social norms that prioritize collective welfare over individual profit.

For example, policies that promote sustainable land use, conservation, and resource management can be enhanced by understanding the behavioral dynamics that drive Indigenous communities’ interactions with their environments. By emphasizing social rewards and framing sustainable practices as part of the communal identity, policies can encourage

participation and ensure long-term adherence to practices that support both economic and ecological well-being. Behavioral nudges such as highlighting social norms, utilizing peer pressure, or structuring incentives based on collective benefits can further strengthen these efforts.

The future of policy design lies in advancing solutions that honor Indigenous wisdom while promoting sustainability. Indigenous knowledge, particularly in areas of resource management, land stewardship, and ecological balance, offers a wealth of experience in managing common-pool resources and navigating the complexities of ecosystems. For instance, practices such as rotational farming, prescribed burning, and wildlife management have been refined over centuries, ensuring that resources are utilized in a manner that supports future generations.

Integrating Indigenous knowledge with behavioral economics can lead to more effective sustainability policies that are culturally relevant and adaptable to local contexts. By respecting Indigenous governance systems, valuing traditional ecological knowledge, and incorporating community-based decision-making, policymakers can create a more inclusive, holistic framework for addressing environmental challenges. Additionally, behavioral economics can support Indigenous communities by enhancing the effectiveness of conservation efforts, improving collective action, and aligning economic incentives with long-term environmental goals.

Policies that honor Indigenous wisdom should also foster collaboration between Indigenous communities and external actors such as governments, NGOs, and researchers. Co-developing policies that incorporate both traditional knowledge and modern economic tools ensures that solutions are not only more inclusive but also more likely to succeed in the long term. Moreover, such collaborative efforts help promote Indigenous self-determination and empower communities to take an active role in shaping their futures. The integration of Indigenous knowledge with behavioral economics offers a promising avenue for developing policies that are both culturally sensitive and forward-thinking. By fostering inclusive, community-driven approaches to economic decision-making, policymakers can create solutions that respect traditional practices, promote sustainability, and enhance well-being for future generations. The future of policy design lies in understanding the synergy between Indigenous wisdom and modern economic insights, leading to more resilient, sustainable, and equitable societies.

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