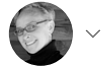


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# How I cured my “b” allergy

I was allergic to the b-word, “behaviour.”

This allergy persisted for many years before I found the cure. Talk to me all day about promoting “action,” but when someone says: “we’re trying to change people’s behaviour,” the sneezing and negative reaction kicks in. When we use the word “behaviour” it is often in relation to a promoted “good behaviour” — Are we talking about children, prisoners, dogs, Austin Powers? Behave!

But then I realized that I didn’t need to use the “b” word in my work; I could get along quite well with the word “action.” I can use the word action while still borrowing from several compelling academic and practical disciplines, including Behavioural Science and Behavioural Design.

I could equally borrow from multiple “b-oriented” resources and models (of which there is no shortage), like the [Behaviour Change Wheel](#), the [Behavioural Drivers Model](#) (BDM), the [Behavioural and Social Drivers Model](#) (BeSD), and the [COM-B Model](#), which considers capability, opportunity and motivation to be important factors when promoting behaviour change.

My allergy to the “b-word” in behaviour change was the idea of trying to change OTHER people’s behaviour. “Let’s change their behaviour” (yikes). Let’s empower others (oof). Let’s give voice (e-g. 2 | 1 | ) OWN behaviour... okay, no

problem with that. Changing one’s own behaviour is where all the “habit” folks come in. I’m thinking of James Clear’s Atomic Habits or Nir Eyal’s Habit Summit and related writing.


This essay is about how I changed *my own behaviour* in relation to the word behaviour. I share the steps I took to cure my “b” allergy in a list just below this cute yellow bee.



Image source: New York Times/Spelling Bee

1. **Substitution:** In my own writing, I use the word “action” as a replacement for “behaviour.” I’ve always felt that things like voting, starting a community association, or picking up trash in my neighborhoods are better described as *actions*, rather than behaviours. When I do use the “b” word, it’s usually in relation to a specific source of information or inspiration, like the resources described earlier in this essay.
2. **Re-framing:** With colleagues in my office, we decided to avoid any framing of behaviour where “people try to change other people’s behaviour.” We believe people might want to change their *own* behaviour, like quitting smoking or eating more nutritious foods or preventing burn-out at work. When we do refer to behaviour change, we usually say something like: “seeking to inspire and/or equip people interested in behaviour change.” We collaborate with people, we don’t try to change them. And anyone who has quit smoking will tell you that being told by others to “quit smoking” is rarely effective and might even back-fire.
3. **De-branding:** When collaborating with people in the region where I work (West and Central Africa), I propose that we use whatever term will be best accepted by government counterparts and other local technical colleagues. This often results in

technical approaches being de-branded, so “Behavioural Science” might get reduced to only “make it easy,” from the EAST Framework of the [Behavioural Insights Team](#) (BIT/UK). De-branding was helpful to us when working in French, as many technical terms can get clunky and long when translated. (“Les sciences comportementales appliquées” doesn’t quite roll right off the tongue).



UNICEF West and Central Africa Region  
Social and Behavior Change Teams

**Cadre conceptuel “FASO”\***  
Sciences Comportementales Appliquées  
(EAST Framework, Behavioural Insights)  
*\*Adapté de: [Behavioral Insights Team](#)  
© Behavioural Insights Team*

**F.A.S.O = Rendez les choses...**

1. **Faciles**
2. **Arrayants**
3. **Sociales\***  
(\*S'appuyer sur des normes sociales positives et les rendre visibles)
4. **Opportune\***  
(\*Timely, la bonne opportunité au bon moment)

*Pour plus de ressources, scannez le code QR ci-dessous*




Image source: UNICEF West and Central Africa, [Social and Behaviour Change library](#).

Thanks to the three steps outlined above, my “b-allergy” has almost entirely disappeared. It now only flares up on occasion, when people talk about trying to change other people.

Using the word “action” in lieu of behaviour has taken care of 80% of the problem. “Behavioural Design,” I love your tools, but I’m going to call you “Action Design.” And when using the term “action design,” we will continue to borrow from both Behavioural Insights and Human Centered Design.

When needed, we will simply keep the “b-word” in our pocket. It might remain unseen, but the useful and usable “b” tools will not be forgotten.

*This essay was inspired by conversations with colleagues from Latin America, notably Jair, Cassia and Markel, from Colombia, Brazil and Venezuela, respectively. Conversations with my co-conspirator Juan (from Toledo) were another inspiration.*

***Cassia, amiga:** I dedicate this essay to you and your colleagues in Panama and beyond who are bringing feminist and Freirian energy to the field of social change — *Estamos juntos!* I look forward to any suggestions you might have, for edits or improvements on this essay. This invitation for suggestions and/or comments is open to all, via the comments below — or via email (address can be found here: <https://www.kpgreiner.com/>)*

Social Change

Behavioural Science

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Action Design

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