DO PEOPLE APPROVE OF NUDGING?

PUBLIC ACCEPTABILITY OF CHOICE ARCHITECTURE INTERVENTIONS

Postdoctoral researcher
Nils Sandman, PhD
Nils.Sandman@utu.fi
• People are not (completely) rational agents
  • Decision making in complex situations is influenced by cognitive biases, heuristics and emotions
  • The way choices are presented affects this sort of cognition

• Choice architecture refers to context in which people make choices
  • By consciously modifying choice architecture people can be steered towards certain choices
  • Example: Default rules
Choice architecture has largest effect when people do not consciously ponder what they should do (system 2 cognition) and just choose intuitively (system 1 cognition).

Consciously designed choice architecture may influence peoples choices without them realizing it.
  - Can be seen as psychological manipulation.

Choice architecture interventions are widely used and some form of choice architecture always exists.
  - Regardless, academia and government should aim for ethical excellence.
• Nudges
  • Evidence based modifications to choice architecture that steer people towards certain choices without limiting the freedom to choose differently
  • Should steer people towards choices that are good for them
  • Should be transparent

• Ethical questions
  • Who has the authority to nudge?
  • Who can decide what is good for the people?
  • Can transparency be achieved?
WHO CAN DECIDE?

• Nudges are based on the idea of *libertarian paternalism*
  • People should be steered towards good choices but their freedom to choose otherwise should not be limited

• What do "good choices" mean?
  • Thaler and Sunstein (2008) defined it as a goal that people would choose for themselves if they would think about the issue rationally
  • Better health, increased wealth
  • Protecting the environment?

• Empirical studies are needed – what people think is acceptable?
INTERNATIONAL ACCEPTABILITY STUDIES

• Largest acceptability studies were conducted by Sunstein et al. in 15 countries
  • Representative population samples of around 1000 people per country

• 15 examples of interventions, rated with approve / disapprove
  • Information campaigns and information labels
  • Default rules, physical choice architecture interventions
  • Subliminal adverts (non-nudge, manipulative)


EXAMPLES USED BY SUNSTEIN ET AL.

**Information campaigns and information labels**

- The federal government requires calorie labels at chain restaurants (such as McDonald’s).
- To reduce childhood obesity, the national government adopts a public education campaign, consisting of information that parents can use to make healthier choices for their children.
- The federal government requires labels on products that have unusually high levels of salt, as in, “This product has been found to contain high levels of salt, which may be harmful to your health.”

**Default rules and physical choice architecture**

- The government requires large electricity providers to adopt a system in which consumers would be automatically enrolled in a “green” energy supplier, but could opt out if they wished.
- To halt the rising obesity problem, the federal government requires large supermarket chains to keep cashier areas free of sweets.

**Subliminal adverts (non-nudge, manipulative)**

- The federal government requires movie theatres to provide subliminal advertisements (i.e., advertisements that go by so quickly that people are not consciously aware of them) designed to discourage people from smoking and overeating.
RESULTS

• **Strong majority support:**
  - Australia, Canada, Germany, USA, UK, Brazil, France, Italy, Russia, South Africa

• **Overwhelming majority support:**
  - China, South Korea

• **Weak majority support:**
  - Japan, Denmark, Hungary

• Information campaign and default rules promoting health and environment receive strong support

• Default rules imposing cost to the nudgee tend no to receive majority support

• Subliminal adverts (non-nudge) is generally rejected but receives majority support in China, South Korea, Brazil, South Africa and Australia
Though most nudges receive majority support in all countries, there are marked differences in approval rates.

- From the data available it is not clear where Finland would fit (General western democracy or outlier such as Denmark?)

We are currently working on project investigating approval rates in Finland with the same protocol as Sunstein et al. (2018)

- Look for the results later this year
THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!