Experiences and Perceptions of Default Nudges

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Avhandlingen för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i psykologi, som med vederbörligt tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakultetsstyrelsen vid Göteborgs universitet kommer att offentligen försvaras fredagen den 10 september 2021, klockan 10:00 i sal F1, Psykologiska institutionen, Haraldsgatan 1, Göteborg.

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Abstract


Of the many challenges we face as individuals and as a society, several of the most important and hardest ones are behavioral. We often know what needs to be done to solve an issue, but struggle to put this knowledge into practice. It is the case for tackling global warning, just as it is for tackling the COVID-19 pandemic.

Insights from psychology and other behavioral sciences are increasingly often used by policymakers to design interventions that promote behavior change in domains such as health, personal finance, and environmental protection. The approach is sometimes referred to as “nudging”, likening the intervention to a gentle nudge in the desired direction. Proponents of nudging maintain that nudges are cost-effective policy instruments that respect people’s freedom of choice. Critics, however, argue that the approach fails on both grounds.

In this thesis, I argue that how people perceive and experience nudge interventions is an underappreciated factor that can help assess, and potentially address, both effectiveness and ethical concerns. In the introduction, I outline a framework for how this can be the case. Specifically, I propose that people’s perceptions and experiences are relevant to assessing (1) the ethics of nudging, (2) the net effect of nudging, and that they may (3) be moderators of the success of nudges influencing behavior. I then present three empirical studies (nine sub-studies, total \( N = 5171 \)) that used online experiments to assess how people perceive and experience being subjected to nudges. In contrast to the majority of similar research, the present studies primarily subjected participants to nudges first-hand. That is, participants did not rate descriptions of nudges, but engaged in choice tasks first hand before assessing the intervention. Results indicated that people subjected to default nudges: experienced themselves as highly, and not less, autonomous and satisfied with their choices (Study I); found the use of the nudge to be fair, though less fair than no nudge (Study II); and favorably perceived a choice architect using the nudge, and not less so than in the absence of a nudge (Study III).

Additionally, the studies found that making the nudge increasingly transparent by disclosing its presence and expected effect to participants did not meaningfully change their experiences of choosing, but could either improve or worsen perceptions of the nudge depending on the circumstances of the evaluation. When participants were disclosed of the nudge after they had already made a choice, this was found to negatively affect their perceptions of the choice architect. Providing a nudge disclosure did not, however, influence participants’ propensity to act in line with the nudge.

I conclude that the present findings paint a generally positive picture of how default nudges are perceived and experienced, but that more research is necessary to properly inform policy. I suggest that policymakers should routinely use measures of choice experiences as a guide when designing new nudge interventions. Nevertheless, as judged by the empirical evidence available at present, default nudges appear to be a viable form of intervention in relation to concerns about both their effectiveness and ethicality.

Keywords: nudge, default effect, nudge experience, nudge transparency

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