

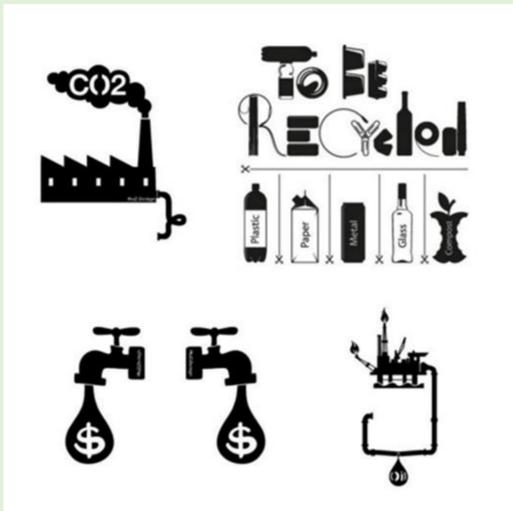
A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF NUDGE THEORY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

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Introduction

Between 2011 - 2014 Environmental Health saw a budget decrease in Wales of 4.4%, culminating in a 72% underspend on a principle public protection service¹. This saw a 16.4% reduction in staff in that period within Environmental Health teams. The objective of this paper was to ascertain whether use of Nudge Theory could increase the efficiency and effectiveness of Environmental Health services, through changing behaviour.



Method

A theoretical literature review was undertaken, considering primary, secondary and grey literature from 2003 to 2016.

- Electronic databases were methodically and manually searched, using search-strings, Booleans and reference checks (Scopus, OvidSP, ScienceDirect, Cochrane Library, GreenFile, Jstor, Google Scholar and Google).
- Papers were critically appraised individually to reduce confirmation bias, ensuring complete consideration of the issues at hand were attained.
- A series of search terms were compiled based on the objective of the review, with alternative terms being used to ensure maximum pertinent literature was identified.

What is Nudge Theory?

Nudge Theory is an alternative communication theory that was released in a 2003 paper² and 2008³ book by Thaler and Sunstein and can be defined using Hansen's definition⁴:

"A Nudge is a function of any attempt at influencing people's judgements, choice, or behaviour in a predictable way, that is made possible because of cognitive boundaries, biases, routines and habits of an individual and social decision-making posing barriers for people to perform rationally in their own declared self-interests and which works by making use of those boundaries, biases, routines and habits as integral parts of such attempts. Thus a Nudge works independently of forbidding or adding rationally relevant choices, changing incentives whether regarded in terms of time, trouble, social sanctions, economic and so forth, or the provision of factual information or rational argumentation."

Ethical Considerations

- Nudge has been criticised as being a form of manipulation or coercion to obtain compliance with an idea and as such can be used to discredit an authority.
- The issue of transparency is also a much debated area of Nudge, where some argue that fore disclosure is necessary to avoid manipulation, whilst others argue that Nudges are more effective when they are covert, however this type of Nudge can be easily misused and damage working relationships with businesses.
- A framework has been devised by Hansen & Jespersen⁵ to classify Nudges into 2 categories and 4 sub-categories, which explore use of automatic and reflective elements of Nudges, the likelihood of a Nudge to work out and reconstruct a Nudge, with the ideal defensible Nudge incorporating both elements.

Practicalities of Nudge

Who is Nudging who?

In a profession which spans such a diverse range of cultures, industries and working practices, what regulators view as a beneficial decision may not be a view shared by those they wish to Nudge, and that "blanket" Nudges may not have much success

When to Nudge?

Nudge is designed to initiate actions, and it is important to know the intended outcomes of the Nudge to be able to judge success and to evaluate. It is another important consideration to realise that Nudges may not invoke long term, sustained behaviour changes, but may only create short term solutions which will need reinforcement with other methods of intervention.

A Nudge increased use of hand disinfectant within a hospital by 64% through use of placement, coloured signs and normative messages.⁶

A reduction in plate size and a normative message at a buffet reduced calorie intake in diners.⁷

Use of social norms and Framing in a hotel saw a 49.3% increase in towels being reused, reducing electricity, water and detergent use.⁸

A normative message increased use of stairs as opposed to use of a lift, increasing physical activity.⁹

Examples of Nudges

At an airport, passenger traffic flow was alleviated by 25% from a bottleneck situation making exiting the airport both quicker and safer, again using norms to Nudge people into using alternative doors.¹⁰

Conclusion

Nudge has the capacity to make quick-fire changes to businesses, and this could be used by regulators to improve compliance across the discipline of Environmental Health. However careful consideration has to be made to the transparency of a Nudge, and the accountability of those who abuse their use. As such use of Type 2 Nudges and Rawls Publicity Principles – that a Nudge must be defensible in the media – is a good starting point for designing Nudges.

References:

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