

How autonomy-supportive are nudges? A preliminary study under the lens of Self-Determination Theory.

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Abstract

Nudges, as introduced by Cass Sunstein and Richard Thaler, are rapidly becoming the new orthodoxy in law and public policy with many governments all over the world using nudges as regulatory tools. Commonly described as interventions that steer people in particular directions but that also allow them to go their own way, they are considered by their proponents to have a generally neutral effect on autonomy. This appears to be the most attractive characteristic of nudges, as they promise to produce positive effects on personal well-being, as well as social welfare, by helping individuals to make better decisions for themselves and others. Our study is the first to test the promise of nudges to respect personal autonomy under the prism of Self-Determination Theory, a motivational theory which posits that autonomy is a basic psychological need. We focus on a specific type of nudge, defaults, and test it within the context of making a choice among a hypothetical set of insurance programs for post-graduate students. One hundred and thirty-nine university students participated in the study. Results show that the experienced Internal Perceived Locus of Causality (I-PLOC) is negatively affected by defaults when the number of options is low but there is no effect when it is high. In other words, people are less likely to view themselves as the origin of their choices when defaults are in place and when options are manageable. The experienced I-PLOC has a positive effect on self-regulation and vitality, partially mediated by perceived competence. We suggest that when even mild manipulations show an undermining effect on autonomy, the so-called 'libertarian paternalistic' interventions should be evaluated on the basis of their

effect on basic need satisfaction, self-regulation and vitality, all of which are basic constituents of autonomy as self-authorship. Possibly, other interventions may be more autonomy supportive, even those that are classified within the traditional legal paternalistic toolkit.

Keywords: self-determination theory, nudges, libertarian paternalism; autonomy, self-authorship.