People can make rational choices for themselves, so let’s help them

Rather than exploiting people’s psychological biases to force outcomes, facilitate the decision-making process instead. Informed decisions may be a better form of “nudge.”

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Save the planet! Everyone recycles! Don’t be the one who doesn’t! By activating a human

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tendency to follow social norms, messaging like this might scare or guilt people into walking the extra block to drop their plastic water bottle into a recycling bin.

But should policymakers really be leveraging their knowledge of human psychology to try to change people's behavior?

A subtler approach might be better, one that delivers modest contextual cues and well-timed bursts of quality information throughout the decision-making process, enabling people to make a well-informed, conscientious decision based on their own processing of that information. In other words, providing understandable and relevant information can lead people to consider their environmental impact and then decide for themselves.

So say Shlomi Sher (Pomona College), Craig R.M. McKenzie (UC San Diego), Johannes Müller-Trede (IESE) and Lim Leong (UC San Diego) in *Current Directions in Psychological Science* of the Association for Psychological Science. As implied by the title of their paper, "Rational Choice in Context," providing usefully informative choice contexts can empower people to make rational choices, without the heavy-handed "nudge."

An optimistic view: respect people as rational

"Nudge" theory was popularized by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein in their 2008 best-selling book of the same name. It supposes people are essentially irrational, so to help them make decisions, one should try to "architect" the choice for them. This is known as "libertarian paternalism" — "libertarian" in the sense that people are still free to choose, but because "father knows best," the options have been designed to favor a predetermined outcome.

This approach, say the authors, is "grounded in a gloomy view of human rationality."

For human decisions that depend on context, choice architects should consider shifting their focus away from trying to exploit psychological weaknesses and biases, and focus instead on how to facilitate the decision-making process.

"We are a lot more optimistic about the possibility of people being able to make reasonable judgments and decisions," says Müller-Trede. "We're not claiming that people are perfectly rational all the time or that we always make the 'right' decisions. But what we are claiming is that some of the behavior that psychological research labels as 'irrational' may actually not be all that irrational; rather, it may often be the result of people processing information in a

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very reasonable way."

In other words, people should be given more credit: they're more than capable of making rational decisions if given a chance.

Don't treat people as puppets: their trust matters

Why does this matter? Aren't both approaches seeking the same thing — for example, convincing people to recycle — but just coming at it from two different angles?

"Though *outcome facilitation* and *process facilitation* are related goals, they should not be confused," insist the authors in their paper. "Outcome-oriented architects (are) willing to reroute cognitive biases (and) may even contrive frames that, although not literally false, serve to subtly mislead the decision-maker. … If the decision-maker makes the right choice for the wrong reasons, the outcome-oriented architect is satisfied (whereas) the process-oriented architect is not."

Müller-Trede elaborates: "What if some human cognitive biases are not weaknesses or vulnerabilities to work around or exploit, but they're just a result of reasonable information processing? What you can do instead is empower people, give them the right information, be transparent and really allow them to make their own decisions."

It's not the end justifying the means (as with nudging) but genuinely caring about the means to achieving the end. Appealing to decision-makers' potential for rationality "respects their dignity" and is subsequently "better poised to preserve their trust," the authors note.

And we needn't look very far to see the consequences of lost trust in society. "People aren't dumb," says Müller-Trede. "If you consistently mislead them, you risk losing whatever goodwill you may have had with them. You may achieve some short-term gain, but over the medium to long term, it's likely going to hurt you."

Whether in terms of messaging around public health campaigns and voting or sustainable consumption and many other kinds of business decisions, "a great deal depends on trust. And to the degree that you systematically mislead people, you're eroding that trust, until people eventually stop listening to your message. Once you lose people's trust, it's hard to win back."

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As the authors conclude, a human decision-maker is not “a hapless puppet of irrational forces” requiring a “paternalistic puppeteer, harnessing irrational means to utilitarian ends.” They recommend “non-paternalistic approaches to choice architecture, along with a richer view of rational choice in context.”

Müller-Trede’s top tips for rational choice contexts:

- Provide relevant information in the cleanest, most transparent and accessible way possible.
- Make it as easy as possible for the person to assess the pros and cons of a particular decision.
- Share your arguments for why you think one option is better than another. If that does not change people’s minds, keep the education campaign going — if your arguments are good, consistent messaging can eventually make those arguments seep through.
- Above all, never lie or twist the information to mislead people into doing the thing that you want them to do.

https://www.youtube.com/embed/jvoLj-Kgrmo

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