1. Introduction

The 2009 publication of the best-selling book *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness* by Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein sparked enormous interest in how choice architecture and nudges could be used to improve outcomes in organizations. Policy-makers inside and outside of government have been scrambling since to master new nudging strategies in order to improve the decisions of citizens, employees, and customers. Over 200 countries and municipalities now boast “centrally directed policy initiatives,” or so-called “nudge-units,” influenced by behavioral science (OECD, 2017) and many Fortune 500 companies are opening similar divisions.

A recent review article highlighted the extraordinary cost-effectiveness of nudges relative to other levers of influence (e.g., incentives, rules, educational campaigns) that are typically used by policymakers inside and outside of organizations to influence behavior (Benartzi et al., 2017). However, in spite of the growing applied interest in using nudging as a policy tool, far more field research is needed on which nudges and choice architecture strategies work best to change behavior in organizations. The goal of this Special Issue was to (a) publish pioneering papers testing the efficacy of nudges and choice architecture through field experiments in organizations and (b) substantially accelerate and shape the direction of academic research in this area.

To do so, we sought papers presenting field experiments alone or in combination with laboratory experiments that explored the efficacy of nudging and choice architecture in organizations. We defined “field experiments” as studies with random assignment of participants to conditions and participants who engaged in the tasks under study in their natural environments.

The manuscripts in this Special Issue are methodologically and typically diverse, and all meaningfully advance our objective of accelerating research on nudges and choice architecture in organizations. Some do so by introducing new tools of choice architecture, others by yielding important new empirical or theoretical insights about previously-studied nudges, and yet others by shedding new light on important ongoing debates in the literature. Each individual article is carefully executed, thought-provoking, and of considerable policy importance. Together, the articles highlight just how exciting and diverse the research on choice architecture and nudging in organizations has become.

2. New tools of choice architecture

Although many studies of choice architecture rely on classic interventions like defaults or social norms, five articles in this special issue test novel tools of choice architecture in organizational settings, expanding the set of techniques policy makers can rely upon to improve decisions in the future.

Li and Hsee demonstrate that the order in which we encounter negotiators influences the offers we make because of our desire not to be influenced by an unjustifiable factor, such as the physical attractiveness of a customer. Sales people tend to offer better prices to attractive customers than to more ordinary-looking customers; however because of a desire for consistency they also tend to offer the same low price to an ordinary-looking customer who enters the store soon after the attractive customer, and to offer the same high price to an attractive customer who enters the store soon after the ordinary-looking customer.

A study by Wu and Paluck illustrates how a nudge that plays to a deeply held cultural belief can be an effective motivator to change behavior when resistance is strong, using a new method for encouraging workplace cleanliness. Workers in Chinese textile factories dropped less waste on the floor when the floor was covered in decals of golden coins—a valued emblem of good fortune. This study also points out that the design and implementation of a nudge needs to be contextualized. The decals were no longer effective after they were temporarily removed and then reintroduced.

Using a novel method to increase sustainable food choices, Vandenbroele, Slabbinck, Van Kerckhove, and Vermeir promoted grocery shoppers’ selection of mock meat by placing the meat in the butcher section of the store, thus emphasizing that mock meat is a substitute for animal meat.

Kalil, Mayer, and Gallegos demonstrated that attendance at publicly-funded preschool centers can be increased using personalized texts that target common malleable barriers faced by parents. The general takeaway of their study is that behavioral interventions work best if (1) the structural and malleable barriers to the desired behaviors are well identified ex-ante, and (2) the interventions are designed specifically to address those malleable obstacles with low-cost light-touch tools.

Barnes, Karpman, Long, Hanoch, and Rice harness information order effects in a study demonstrating that consumers make better decisions in the future.

Following Benartzi et al. (2017), we define “nudges” as tools that aim to change ‘people’s behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives. To count as a mere nudge, [an]...intervention must be easy and cheap to avoid. Nudges are not mandates’ (Thaler & Sunstein, 2009). Nudges do not impose material costs but instead alter the underlying ‘choice architecture,’ for example by changing the default option to take advantage of people’s tendency to accept defaults passively. Nudges stand in contrast to traditional policy tools, which change behavior with mandates or bans or through economic incentives (including significant subsidies or fines).

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health insurance plan choices when health plans are ordered by projected total costs. Furthermore, this intervention was especially effective for more vulnerable consumers.

Each of these papers tests a novel choice architecture intervention or employs an existing nudge in a novel organizational context. In so doing, these papers broaden our knowledge of the behavioral science tools that can be used to effect organizational change.

3. New insights about previously-identified nudges

In addition to documenting and exploring novel behavioral insights, several manuscripts in this special issue deepen and expand our understanding of previously studied behavioral insights.

Sharif and Shu study how the way goals are framed affects people’s likelihoods of persisting after failing to achieve their goals. They present a field experiment in which participants are assigned a goal of achieving a certain number of steps each day. They contrast presenting this as a goal of achieving the aimed-for number of steps on five out of seven days, seven out of seven days, or seven out of seven days with an “emergency reserve” of two skip days. The “emergency reserve” framing made people more likely to persist with achieving the aimed-for number of steps on days after they failed to achieve the aimed-for number of steps. In four follow up studies they replicate the main finding while providing insight into the underlying mechanisms. This builds on existing research showing that framing goals as having “emergency reserves” can increase goal success and motivation by showing that these reserves can also help people persist after failure.

Robinson, Gallus, Lee, and Rogers study the impact of symbolic awards on student absenteeism. They first report that nearly all schools use some variant of awards to reduce student absenteeism. Despite this prevalence, they find in a large field experiment involving over 15,000 students that awards for perfect attendance increase subsequent student absences. Low-academically performing students—presumably the ones educators are most interested in motivating to attend school—show the biggest backlash to the awards. A subsequent study suggests that awards of this kind send the unintended messages that the recipients were the biggest backlash to the awards. A subsequent study suggests that awards of this kind send the unintended messages that the recipients were more than the individual themself. In particular, while previous work has focused on how prosocial incentives affect effort levels, Schwartz and colleagues look at the decision about whether to participate in the incentivized activity in the first place. They find that prosocial incentives make people less likely to participate, even when people can choose to keep or donate their earnings. This observation suggests clear limits on the value of prosocial incentives, and also informs ongoing debates about the extent to which people have “truly” altruistic preferences.

Bhatnai provides new evidence regarding the power of injunctive norms for shaping behavior. While a great deal of prior work has demonstrated the power of nudges that harness descriptive and injunctive norms in tandem, there has been less investigation of the causal impact of injunctive norms in isolation. Thus, the effectiveness of messaging that conveys a social judgment about one’s behavior remained an open question. The field experiment on water conservation presented by Bhatnai demonstrates that when injunctive norms are added to descriptive norms messaging, they enhance the impact of the messaging and can encourage greater resource conservation.

Gauri, Jamison, Mazar, and Ozier consider the other side of social information—the impact of providing others with information about your behavior, rather than providing yourself with information about the behavior or attitudes of others. While such “social recognition” has been found to be effective in a variety of settings, the study by Gauri and colleagues demonstrates the importance of context. It shows that social recognition improves record keeping in health facilities in one state in Nigeria, but not in another. This context sensitivity emphasizes the need for more theoretical development in this area and for evidence-based policy.

Saccardo, Li, Samek, and Gneezy generate new insights into “consumer elective pricing” schemes, wherein consumers can decide for themselves how much to pay for a product or service. They find that people choose to pay or donate more when an interaction is framed in a way that highlights the social aspect of an exchange, demonstrating the malleability of social preferences, and providing important guidance for the deployment of consumer elective pricing in both commercial and charitable domains.

Together, these papers emphasize the sensitivity and complexity of the social side of human behavior and, accordingly, both the power and potential pitfalls of social nudges.

4. New insights about ongoing debates

The field experiments in this issue not only yield practical insights, but also shed new light on ongoing theoretical debates in the literature. Four articles presented here are in this vein, with a particular focus on the way social motives and concerns shape behavior.

Schwartz, Keenan, Imas, and Gneezy examine “prosocial incentives” whereby an individual’s effort benefits a charitable organization rather than the individual themself. In particular, while previous work has focused on how prosocial incentives affect effort levels, Schwartz and colleagues look at the decision about whether to participate in the incentivized activity in the first place. They find that prosocial incentives make people less likely to participate, even when people can choose to keep or donate their earnings. This observation suggests clear limits on the value of prosocial incentives, and also informs ongoing debates about the extent to which people have “truly” altruistic preferences.


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