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# Moving from nudge to holistic behaviour change

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**Abstract**
This paper explores practitioners' perspectives on nudging. Nudges are interventions to change behaviour. The problem of using the term generically to describe behaviour change is that it emphasises the intervention at the expense of possibly ignoring – or not paying enough attention to – the behaviour you're trying to change or the characteristics of the target population. This is important because prior to any attempt at development of interventions, a rigorous understanding of the mechanisms underlying behaviour is needed. This paper provides some preliminary insights to build such an understanding of what works in making interventions for behaviour change sticky, scaleable and transferable.

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Working as a practitioner in behavioural science it is clear that for many practitioners the discipline is often considered to be synonymous with 'nudge'[1]. Indeed, nudge, system 1 and 2 and biases heuristics are frequently understood as effectively all there was when it comes to understanding and changing behaviour. For some this might even be understood as a kind of bias bias – an unwarranted preoccupation with bias[2]. So just what is the problem with this? After all, nudge has been shown to be an effective means for changing behaviour in a range of contexts (Hummel & Maedche, 2019).

One immediate challenge is the way in which the use of the term nudge frames the way we think about behaviour change. A nudge is of course a type of intervention that is designed to change behaviour. The problem of using the term generically to describe behaviour change is that it emphasises the intervention at the expense of possibly ignoring – or not paying enough attention to – the behaviour you're trying to change or the characteristics of the target population. This is important because prior to any attempt at development of interventions, a rigorous understanding of the mechanisms underlying behaviour is needed.

Given that much behaviour change practitioner work operates across a wide variety of behaviour change contexts (e.g. health behaviours, transport usage, usage of household goods, vaccination behaviours) it is very apparent to practitioners that there are a wide range of mechanisms that can underpin behaviours. To some extent these are, of course, dependent on the type of behaviour in question. For example, it is no surprise that mechanisms underlying vaccination behaviours are very different to those involved in behaviours relating to the purchase of solid shampoo. However, we can also observe that in addition, the stage of behaviour adoption is also important. The Transtheoretical Framework (TTF) (Prochaska, DiClemente & Norcross, 1992) outlines a number of stages of behaviour change, indicating that change is a gradual progression, marked by five distinct phases: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance.

This is an important consideration in the context of nudge. Attempting to 'nudge' behaviour which is at the precontemplation stage (where people are 'in denial' that their behaviour is a problem) is unlikely to be effective. Nudge instead tends to focus on 'action' and, of course, if there are very specific behaviours we want to influence, then Nudge may be an entirely appropriate tool to be using. But in TTF terms many of the challenges we face (e.g. vaccination, sustainability, disruption to previously stable consumer categories) require activity earlier on in the behaviour adoption process. This means that nudges are in fact only a relatively small sub-set of available Behaviour Change Interventions. For example, Nudges map to maybe three Intervention Functions in the Behaviour Change Wheel, Environmental Restructuring, Modelling and Enablement (Michie, van Stralen & West, 2011). As such the practitioner needs to look more much broadly for the appropriate tools to influence behaviours. Assuming that nudge is synonymous with behaviour change, means there is a danger of assuming that nudges are considered to be appropriate for all behaviour change challenges which is far from the case. Even the originators and proponents of nudging acknowledge that nudges are not always the best tool for inducing change

[1] See mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/the-organization-blog/answer-these-6-questions-before-setting-up-a-nudge-unit and blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/nudge-units-where-they-came-and-what-they-can-do

[2] According to Gigerenzer (2018) this preoccupation persists despite evidence that people have largely fine-tuned intuitions about chance, frequency, and framing and little evidence that the alleged biases are potentially costly in terms of less health, wealth, or happiness.

and that, in many cases, nudges work in concert with other interventions (Benartzi et al, 2017).

In many ways it falls to the practitioner to help identify the stage of behaviour change of the target population. A commissioner of behaviour change programmes is typically (and not unreasonably) mainly interested in their own behaviour change challenge. The practitioner, on the hand, will necessarily need to adopt a more holistic understanding of that consumer's life. This holistic perspective helps the practitioner to see how a specific behaviour change challenge from the commissioner, in fact, competes with many behaviour change challenges of an individual. We all have a wide range of things that we feel we ought to be doing but there are only so many things we can attend to at any one time. We may be focused on changing behaviour around our finances, and expending much time and energy on this, in which case behaviour change relating to exercising may not, at this point, be effective.

The practitioner will seek to understand the priority that the behaviour change target is given, within the population. If it is low, then the types of intervention that are likely to be effective will be very different to those that would be effective when the target population is at the 'action' stage (where they are beginning to take direct action in order to accomplish their goals).

Overall, therefore, there is a danger that a 'Nudge first' approach increases the likelihood of not understanding behaviours as the focus is immediately on the solution, not on better understanding the problem. Of course, as mentioned, there are plenty of occasions when nudge is entirely appropriate and useful but we argue there is a need to take a much broader science lens to understanding and changing behaviour.

Given that populations will be at different stages of behaviour change, this raises the question of what sort of outcomes (dependant variables) should be selected as an appropriate outcome for the intervention activity. So, for example, we may wish to nudge people into taking more exercise, or consuming less plastics, or any other commonly mentioned example of improving the social good, by using a series of interventions such as campaign messaging. The obvious solution to assessing impact is to then surely measure the change in actual fitness activity. However, there are challenges with this.

While the ultimate aim is clearly change in behaviour, if the target population has not even engaged with the issue, then that might be ambitious. It may, for example, be more realistic to move people from lack of awareness to preparation than to take them right the way through to behaviour change. So, if someone has not even heard of the shingles vaccine then a campaign to raise awareness and talk to your GP may be more suitable than something which is designed to 'nudge' from a position of not knowing anything about it. What is measured as an outcome needs to be considered as a function of what the behaviour change programme is trying to achieve. Survey-based measures of attitudes or understanding may well be most appropriate given the focus might be on influencing mental preparedness rather than the end target behaviour.

Nudges certainly have their place in any practitioner's toolbox. However, to assume that behaviour change can be equated to nudge is to miss the mark in a number of ways. A much more holistic approach to understanding behaviour, designing interventions and measuring impact is required if behaviour change is to be achieved.

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