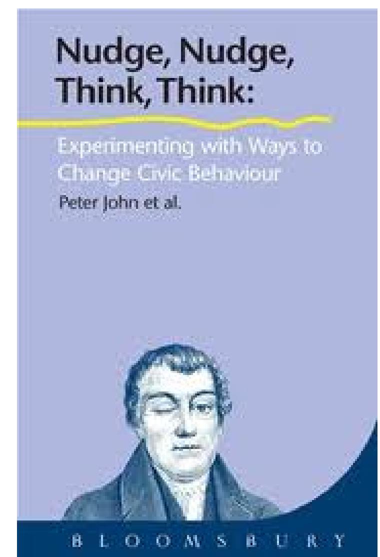
Nudge, Nudge, Think, Think: experimenting with ways to change civic behaviour

__Peter John__'s recent book investigates howto get the best out of nudge theories, considering positive behaviour changes in recycling, volunteering, voting, and petitioning, and provides some unexpected insights about some interventions, finds __Sander van der Linden__.

Nudge, Nudge, Think, Think: Experimenting with Ways to Change Civic Behaviour. Peter John, Sarah Cotterill, Alice Moseley, Liz Richardson, Graham Smith, Gerry Stoker and Corinne Wales. Bloomsbury Academic Publishing. September 2011.



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In 2008, Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein managed to get the attention of public policy makers with a behavioural change strategy that they referred to as 'nudge' – a term that has now become a buzzword in the behavioural public policy sphere. Nudge draws heavily on the behavioural economics literature and argues that by changing people's choice environment, citizens can be gently 'nudged' into acting in ways that are more beneficial to not only themselves but also to others. Over the years, several criticisms have been raised with regard to the use of 'nudge' strategies. Public activists have referred to nudge as being 'manipulative' and a form of 'subliminal mind-control'. In addition, behavioural researchers have argued that the effects of 'nudge' are rather marginal and relatively short-lived.

In findings ways to improve 'nudge'-based strategies and in search of alternative solutions Peter John and colleagues join the behavioural change bandwagon with their book *Nudge, Nudge, Think, Think: Experimenting with Ways to Change Civic Behaviou*r. The authors start off with a brief normative debate about the government's role in changing civic behaviour and end the first chapter with an explanation of how their 'think' strategy differs from 'nudge'. Nudge essentially assumes (or reckons) that individuals are 'imperfect' and need assistance in making the right decisions. Moreover, the government should act as a 'teacher and offer guidance' by steering citizens down the path that is most beneficial to them and society at large. As a result, the individual is somewhat regarded as 'incapable' and essentially excluded from the behavioural change process. 'Think' on the other hand assumes that individuals can step away from day-to-day life and reflect on a wide range of public policy choices. It assumes that people are 'knowledge hungry', 'learn to process new information' and reach 'new heights of reflection'. Think requires active deliberation and assumes that individuals would want to engage in debates about important issues with other members of society. Thus, while nudge focuses on individuals and the design of a choice environment where the cost of behavioural change is minimized, think strategies stimulate group participation and encourages the design of democratic institutional platforms that support citizen-lead investigations.

It is surprisingly refreshing to read that the authors stress and support the role of evidence-based public policy and endorse the use of randomized controlled experiments as an unparalleled way of inferring causality and judging the usefulness of various public behavioural interventions. In fact, the main

purpose of the book is to investigate the potential of nudge and think strategies by means of conducting experiments. In doing so, the authors discuss a range of important civic behaviours, including: recycling, volunteering, voting, petitioning, giving, donating, debating, including and linking.

Yet, it is somewhat disappointing to find out that the overall significance of the authors' 'nudge experiments' are rather unremarkable. The results indicate that initial positive changes in the aforementioned behaviours varied between 1 and 9 percent points (with 9% being a rather optimistic upper bound). While the authors conclude that these results validate the usefulness of 'nudge' and 'think' interventions, to the more critical reader, they rather confirm the marginal effects of nudge strategies and in this regard, the book brings little new evidence to the table. Furthermore, when reading through the first five chapters, one is led to believe that this is a book about 'nudge' rather than anything else. Out of the 9 experiments the authors discuss, only 3 are purely about testing 'think' interventions.

Along the way some hope is vested in the belief that think-strategies will complement and improve upon the nudge-results. Yet, when the reader finally gets to the think-based interventions, it is equally disappointing to find out that some of these were in fact 'design experiments'. Design experiments lack many of the clear-cut benefits that are inherent to controlled experiments – making it harder to discern specific effects. It is also rather unsatisfying to find out that, in the context of e.g. organ donations, employing a mixed design (i.e. combining a nudge and think strategy) actually decreased donation registration rates by a stunning 15%. It appears that getting people to think and actively debate such controversial topics can actually backfire by providing convincing arguments as to why not to donate. Thus, in this regard 'think' strategies are likely to suffer from the same short-comings as 'nudge' (e.g. in the author's recycling experiment, the 'social information nudge' is likely to have primed some people to consider that they were actually recycling much more than their peers). The second donating experiment (which simply adjusted the default) did book some success, yet the informed reader might wonder where the novelty is here, as changing registration defaults is one of the oldest tricks in the book.

All in all, the experiments performed by Peter John and colleagues do provide some interesting (unexpected) insights about a range of interventions and their book makes a good first start in trying to mix and match different solutions in attempt to change civic behaviour. In sum, *Nudge, Nudge, Think, Think* not only informs the reader about how nudge and think strategies can be combined, but also about what the potential benefits and drawbacks of such strategies are for a range of public behaviours. In addition, the book makes another useful contribution by informing the reader about the kind of cost-benefit calculations that are associated with various interventions. While a deeper understanding of human behaviour (that going beyond behavioural economics) is often lacking (i.e. nudge and think assumptions are probably both at equally unrealistic ends of the human behaviour spectrum) the authors deliver on what they set out to achieve: they refrain from entering into a complex academic debate about how to change public behaviour. Instead, they provide a good practical read for anyone who is interested in the bottom line; "what works, and what doesn't?".

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