

# ***Nudges* and Cultural Variance: a Note on Selinger and Whyte**

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**Abstract** Selinger and Whyte argue that Thaler and Sunstein are insufficiently sensitive to cultural variance in *Nudge*. I construct a taxonomy of the various roles that cultural variance may play in *nudges*. First, biases that are exploited in *nudging* may interact with features that are culturally specific. Second, cultures may be more or less susceptible to certain biases. Third, cultures may resolve conflicting biases in different ways. And finally, *nudge* may be enlisted for different aims in different cultures.

**Keywords** Nudges · Biases · Cultural variance

## **1 Introduction**

*Nudges* make use of certain perceptual, cognitive and behavioural biases, as studied in what Thaler and Sunstein (T&S) call ‘the emerging science of choice.’ Selinger and Whyte raise an interesting point, viz. that T&S are insufficiently sensitive to cultural variance. Without purporting to be exhaustive, I will construct a taxonomy of different ways in which *nudges* can be subject to cultural variance.

## **2 Interaction with Culturally Variable Features**

Biases may interact with culturally variable features and hence will meet with different cultural implementations. Let us consider two examples involving behavioural biases.

The flies painted on the urinals in Schiphol airport, which were intended to improve men’s aim (Thaler and Sunstein 2008 (T&S), p. 3–4) are an oft-cited example of a

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*nudge*. It is a question of debate whether men are socialised to take aim when urinating or whether this is a drive that is engrained in their nature. If the latter, we might say that it is a behavioural bias, since there are typically no good reasons for doing so. In *Civilisation and its Discontents*, Freud (1989, p. 42–3n) writes that it is ‘a great cultural conquest’ when primitive man controls his natural urge to urinate on smouldering ashes and instead tends the fire for the benefit of society. Now, if there is such a natural urge, then the question still remains what it is that they wish to urinate on. Flies may do the job in one culture, but due to culturally variant meanings, something else may be required in other culture, as Selinger and Whyte correctly point out.

Social advertisements often capitalise on certain cultural biases. To take a toy example, suppose that a particular culture buys into the ‘dumb jock’ stereotype. Then an advertisement in which a token dumb jock performs an action (say binge-drinking) that is to be discouraged might be effective within this culture. But if another culture lacks this stereotype, the social advertisement will be ineffective. What are we to say about such cases? One might object that this is not a *nudge* because it does not change the choice architecture itself. Fair enough, but note that some of T&S’s examples also involve social advertisement, such as advertisement to encourage organ donations which capitalises on the fact that a large percentage of people have chosen to be organ donors (Bovens 2008, p. 208–9 and *n.* 4). The success of the dumb jock advertisement rides on a cultural bias, viz. the stereotype in question, as well as a behavioural bias. The behavioural bias is the bias to avoid patterns of agency displayed by people with whom one does not wish to be associated and to emulate patterns of agency displayed by people with whom one does wish to be associated. For example, we see this kind of bias at work when countries in Europe that were occupied by Nazi Germany refrained from introducing daylight savings until the oil crisis in the 1970s because it was a policy that was introduced by the Nazis. (See Time and Date 2010.)

### 3 Differential Susceptibility to Biases

Different cultures are subject to perceptual, cognitive and behavioural biases to different degrees. Let us consider an example of each kind of bias.

*Perceptual* biases tend to be relatively resistant to cultural variance. T&S report on Shepard’s table tops that are the same size but seem to be different in size (T&S, p. 17–19). They discuss the illusion that one is going faster when one drives across increasingly smaller gaps between white lines drawn perpendicularly on the highway and hence this device can be used as a *nudge* to induce people to lower their speed (T&S, p. 37–9). I think that one would be hard-pressed to find cultures in which people were not subject to such perceptual biases. However, even such biases are not ubiquitous—cultural variance was found in many of the standard visual illusions (e.g. the Müller-Lyer Illusion) with non-Western cultures being less susceptible to some such illusions (Segall et al. 1966, p. 99–214).

Let us turn to an example of a *cognitive* bias. In Festinger’s classical cognitive dissonance experiments (1957), subjects were asked about their attitudes (say, about certain moral issues). Subsequently, they were instructed to prepare and deliver a speech that ran counter to their attitudes. Some were paid smaller amounts and some

were paid larger amounts for participating in the experiment. Finally, all were asked once again about where they stood on the issue after having delivered their speeches. It turned out that the ones who were paid less had changed their attitudes to a greater degree than those who were paid more. For the former, the small payment was not enough of a reason why they had engaged in a counter-attitudinal speech—so they fabricated one, viz. these were simply the attitudes that they actually held. The latter did not need to change their attitudes—the large payment was a sufficient reason for them to hold a counter-attitudinal speech. There is an extensive literature on the degree to which the intensity of this phenomenon is subject to cultural variation. In cultures in which attitudes are less defining of one’s self-identity (e.g. in Eastern cultures), counter-attitudinal behaviour generates less dissonance and the phenomenon is less pronounced. For an overview and discussion of the literature, see Gawronski et al. (2008).

*Behavioural* biases are also prone to cultural variance. I was once told the following story to illustrate the difference between the English and the Irish. Suppose that an Englishman and an Irishman go to the races and win 1K in their respective currencies. Subsequently, they invest their gains into a new bet and they lose. Then the Englishman is depressed because he lost 1K where the Irishman is indifferent because he neither gained nor lost anything. The suggestion is that the Irish are less subject to the endowment effect than the English.

#### 4 Resolving Conflicting Biases

Biases can conflict with one another, and there may be cultural variance in how a balance is struck. The clearest such cases involve conflicting behavioural biases. People are drawn in by desires for conformity as well as anti-conformity—i.e. the desire to stand out (Elster 1983, p. 23, 40, 67). Now, some cultures may stress the former at the expense of the latter and vice versa. The social advertisement pronouncing that a large percentage of people have chosen to be an organ donor (T&S, p. 180–2) may completely backfire in cultures that value non-conformity. And furthermore some cultures value conformity or anti-conformity within radically different contexts. In such matters, effective *nudging* will require a keen awareness of the culture in question.

#### 5 The Aims of Nudge

One needs to be careful to distinguish cultural variance in the *workings* of *nudging* from the cultural variance in the *aims* for which *nudges* are enlisted. For example, we are clearly in need of T&S’s *Save More Tomorrow* scheme (T&S, p. 112–7) in economies in the West, where saving rates for retirement are alarmingly low. But we would not need such a *nudge* in economies in the East in which the savings rate is too high, which may stand in the way of economic development. In such countries, we might use the very same behavioural bias and review retirement investments not 3 months before but rather 3 months after raises are being awarded, hoping that the endowment effect has taken hold and that they no longer want to part with their raises.

## 6 Conclusion

Selinger and Whyte are right to capitalise on the importance of cultural variance in *nudging*. I have tried to expand their discussion in this note by constructing a simple taxonomy of the various roles that cultural variance may play in *nudge*.

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