CO-DESIGN OF BEHAVIOURAL PUBLIC POLICIES: EPISTEMIC PROMISES AND CHALLENGES

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Co-design of behavioural public policies: epistemic promises and challenges

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Abstract (109 words)

The aim of this article is to highlight the potential of codesign approaches to address the risk of boomerang effects following the implementation of social norm nudges. I highlight several epistemic causes of the boomerang effect and argue that a co-design of nudges could provide an effective solution to address these causes. Furthermore, I argue that such an approach, based on the deliberation process between citizens and experts, is likely to enhance the ethical aspects of nudging. After a clarification of the notion of 'codesign', which remains quite elusive in the literature, I discuss some challenges that codesign approaches face, in particular regarding the status of 'expert-citizens' in codesign.

Keywords: social norm nudges, boomerang effect, expert-citizens, co-design, social acceptability, behavioural public policies.

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Introduction

Grounded in the principles of behavioural economics, nudges entail subtle modifications in choice architecture aimed at guiding individuals towards beneficial decisions without infringing upon their autonomy (see Congiu and Moscati 2022 for a survey). A common strategy to influence behaviours is to rely on *social norms*, which might exert a profound influence on behaviour, shaping both constructive actions and detrimental habits. Leveraging descriptive and injunctive norms, social norms nudges have demonstrated efficacy in fostering prosocial conduct, as evidenced by initiatives promoting energy conservation (e.g. Allcott, 2011; Costa & Kahn, 2013)

Yet, the purported success of social norms nudges hinges upon a crucial threshold—the proportion of individuals adhering to the desired behaviour. When this threshold is not met, *the boomerang effect* ensues. Rooted in misperceptions such as *pluralistic ignorance* and *false consensus*, this phenomenon triggers a paradoxical response, wherein individuals, upon realizing their perceived uniqueness, deviate from the intended behaviour, leading to heightened consumption or engagement in unhealthy practices (Osman 2020).

Recognizing the limitations of traditional top-down approaches to nudge design, I advocate for a paradigm shift towards co-design methodologies. The aim of the paper is thus to highlight the epistemic benefits of the co-design of nudges compared to a top-down approach. By fostering collaboration between experts and citizens, co-design endeavours to prevent the boomerang effect while enhancing the ethical acceptability of nudges. In a context of declining trust in traditional governance structures, concepts such as co-production and co-design have emerged as promising avenues for revitalizing public policy (Durose *et al* 2022). Yet, the ambiguous nature of these terms underscores the need for a coherent framework delineating their scope and applicability. Furthermore,

the adoption of co-design methodologies is not devoid of challenges. Chief among these is the delicate balance between democratic legitimacy and the inadvertent reinforcement of existing power dynamics. As participants transition from ordinary citizens to expert-citizens, the risk of perpetuating paternalistic tendencies looms large. Consequently, a nuanced approach that safeguards against such pitfalls while capitalizing on the transformative potential of co-design is imperative.

In section 1, I present the social norm nudges and analyse the epistemic reasons which can lead such nudges to backfire. In section 2, I briefly define the concepts of co-production and co-design, and argue that this methodology offers a promising approach to tackle the boomerang effects and the epistemic limits of top-down approaches. Section 3 concludes by discussing some challenges faced by co-design approaches.

1. Social norm nudges

1.1 Using social norms as nudges

Social norms can influence both favourable behaviours like keeping public places clean, and detrimental ones as criminality (Glaeser et. Al., 1996) or smoking (Christakis & Fowler, 2008). Social norms can be described as unofficial rules that individuals tend to follow when most people in their reference network conform to them or when most people in their reference network believe they should adhere to them (Bicchieri, 2016). Hence, a *social norm* is a rule of behaviour such that individuals prefer to conform to it on condition that they believe that (i) most people in their reference network conform to it (empirical expectation) (ii) that most people in their reference network believe they ought

to conform to it (normative expectation) (Bicchieri 2016, p35).

In this paper I will refer to the use of a social norm as a 'nudge' *as social norms nudges* or *norm-nudges*. A nudge can be defined as a slight modification in the choice architecture that can alter individual's behaviours towards better, healthier, and more virtuous outcomes for them or society, without decreasing their own welfare (Sunstein and Thaler, 2009). The combination between nudges and social norms has proven to be a relevant tool for encouraging people to make prosocial choices. In the context of energy conservation, nudges tend to encourage households to bring their energy consumption closer to that of their neighbours (Allcott, 2011; Costa & Kahn, 2013). A *norm-nudge* is defined by Bicchieri and Dimant (2022) as a nudge whose mechanism of action relies on *eliciting social expectations* with the intent of inducing desirable behaviour, under the assumption that individual preferences for performing the targeted behaviour are *conditional on social expectations*. Norm-nudging may provide information about what 'most people' in the same situation do, or what 'most people' in the same situation approve or disapprove of. In the first case, *norm-nudges* intend to induce or even change individuals' empirical expectations about how others behave, in the second *norm-nudges* intend to induce (or change) their normative expectations about what others believe is the right thing to do (Bicchieri and Dimant 2022).

According to Rouillé (2023), the standard way to apply a social norm nudge is to inform people that most of their group acts in a given way (the desirable behaviour) to incite them to adopt the norm. A standard structure of such information is as follows: "I DON'T SMOKE. Just like 88% of ETHS students." (Evanston Township High School, National Social Norms Institute, 2012). The objective is then two-fold: on the one hand to convince the remaining 12% left to stop smoking and on the other hand, to confirm the others that their behaviour is 'correct'. In the literature, the latter is named a *descriptive*

norm. A *descriptive norm* can also be associated with an *injunctive norm* that indicates the approved behaviour, in our example: "drastically reducing the chances of developing cardiorespiratory diseases". Typically, a social norm nudge is comprised of a *descriptive norm*, i.e., what the behaviour of other people is, and an *injunctive norm*, i.e., what other people approve of (Loschelder et al., 2019). The term 'descriptive norm' is widely used in the psychological literature to mean the perception of what is commonly done, what is usual and customary (Schultz et al. 2007). In this paper, I will use the definition proposed by Bicchieri (2016, p.19) whereas a *descriptive norm* is a behavioural pattern such that individuals prefer to conform to it on condition that they believe that most people in their reference network also conform to it (empirical expectation). Note that *social norms* include both a descriptive component and a normative one, whereas the common definition of injunctive norm includes only a normative component. Social norms, to exist, need *both* components (Bicchieri and Dimant 2022).

1.2 Epistemic reasons of boomerang effects

From the emerging literature on 'nudges that fail', Osman (2020) suggests how this tool of behavioural public policy can backfire creating what we call a *boomerang effect*. The literature, however, does not offer yet a big array of solutions proposing new ways or methodologies to avoid this issue. The aim of this paper is to tackle this slackness in the literature by proposing co-design as a possible solution to prevent the boomerang effect. The use of social norms nudges is likely to be efficient, only if the proportion of people who already behaves 'in the correct way' is above a certain threshold. Otherwise, this tool can potentially produce a *boomerang effect* which induces a person who acts prosocially to lessen her behaviour after being informed that her prosocial contribution is above the average. I will discuss three mechanisms that can lead social nudges to backfire, namely

misperceptions, misunderstanding the relevant reference network, and not trusting the messenger.

Misperceptions correspond to the gap between actual attitudes or behaviours, and what people think is true about others' attitudes or behaviours. As Berkowitz (2004) exemplifies, the majority who engage in healthy behaviour may incorrectly believe they are in the minority (*pluralistic ignorance*). In contrast, the minority of people with unhealthy attitudes and/or behaviours may incorrectly think that they are in the majority (*false consensus*). Finally, an individual may enjoy thinking that her or his behaviour is more unique than it really is (*false uniqueness*). Each of these misperceptions operates in a different way and may affect behaviour differently.

The *pluralistic ignorance,* according to Berkowitz (2004) is the most common misperception. It occurs when a majority of individuals falsely assume that most of their peers behave or think differently from them when in fact their attitudes and/or behaviour are similar (Miller & McFarland, 1987, 1991; Prentice & Miller, 1996; Toch & Klofas, 1984). For example, most college students drink moderately or not at all but incorrectly assume that other college students drink more than themselves and more than they do in reality. Pluralistic ignorance encourages individuals to suppress healthy attitudes and behaviours that are falsely thought to be non-conforming and to provide encouragement to engage in the unhealthy behaviours that are seen incorrectly as normative.

The *false Consensus* is the incorrect belief that others are like one-self when in fact they are not (Ross, Greene & House, 1977). Berkowitz (2004) gives the following example, heavy drinkers may incorrectly think that most other students are heavy drinkers, or prejudiced individuals may incorrectly believe that they speak for their group.

The *false uniqueness* occurs when individuals who are in the minority assume that the difference between themselves and others is greater than is actually the case (Suls &

Wan, 1987). False uniqueness may occur among abstainers, who underestimate the prevalence of abstinence and falsely assume that they are more unique than they really are.

Social norms nudges intend to get rid of these misperceptions using the combination of descriptive and injunctive norms. A risk is, however, that the nudge backfires when the individuals already 'behaving correctly' realize the existence of this misperception and e.g. consider that they were not drinking that much as they were thinking. The direct consequence could then be an increased consumption and the failure of the nudge.

Norm-nudges also tend be ineffective or even backfire due to misunderstanding of the relevant reference work. As underlined by Hogg and Turner (1987), reference networks are the strongest influence on behaviour: what people in one's ethnic group, gender, religious or political community do and think exert a much greater influence than people who are perceived as dissimilar. Such norms are properties of groups, not individuals, so as Bicchieri and Dimant (2022) point out, it is important to clearly identify the reference network of norm-followers. This aspect is fundamental to avoid uncertainty about the relevant reference network which may lead to a reduced norm compliance. In another words, which may not lead to a behavioural change, thus a norm-nudge that fails as result of a self-serving interpretation justifying the former behaviour. For example, informing individuals that 'most people save energy by reducing use of air conditioners at peak times' may lead to several interpretations of who those people are. They may be neighbours, or instead people who live in other, different and cooler areas, and in that case, a self-serving interpretation may lead one to think that, in one's particular environment, keeping air conditioning at full power is fine.

Another reason why norm-nudges can fail, pointed out by Bicchieri and Dimant (2022), is when the messenger is not trusted. According to Miller and McFarland (1987), credibility is particularly important in cases of pluralistic ignorance, when a descriptive norm is misperceived. When individuals engage in social comparisons and infer common behaviour from possibly limited observations, but cannot transparently communicate their true preferences, public revelations of real participation rates (if lower than they appear) can have a major impact. Berkowitz and Perkins (1987) have touted the effectiveness of such belief shocks on college drinking rates, provided that the source of the message is trusted.

My proposal to tackle these epistemic challenges is to shift from traditional top-down approaches to a bottom-up methodology, leading to the promising idea of co-designing nudges. I will thus briefly summarize key definitions of co-production and co-design, and illustrate how this approach can address the limits discussed above.

2. Co-designing nudges

2.1 Definitions of co-design

As a socio-economic landscape spreads where citizens' trust in government directives dwindles, concepts as co-design, co-production, co-governance, etc., has been put forth as promising approaches to improve public policies and government services. The strength of these concepts is based on a reciprocal process of exchange between diverse stakeholders (Duggan, 2020) in order to generate outcomes that are only possible because of this deliberate intersection of difference and principally addressing complex issues that governments fail to resolve. Even though, as these concepts are described as promising, they remain quite ambiguous because of its lack of a common definition across disciplines.

This lack of common definition is underlined by Durose *et al* (2022), as co-production now seems to be everywhere, with the concept deployed across scientific disciplines and beyond (Albrechts, 2012; Ansell & Gash, 2008; Brandsen & Honigh, 2015; Polk, 2015, p. 427; Haberhehl & Perry, 2021; Osborne et al., 2016; Osborne, 2018; Norstrom et al., 2020; Chambers et al., 2021). However, when the terms co-production, co-design, co-governance, etc., are used in academic writing, and policy and practice circles, it is becoming increasingly difficult to pinpoint exactly what is being talked about. Durose et al. (2022) underline that the reinvigoration of co-production in global academic scholarship since the mid-2000s (Loeffler & Bovaird, 2021), has given rise to a sense of co-production as a 'concept with adjectives', as reflected in the range of associated terms such as co-design, co-creation and co-governance (Osborne, 2018; Vershuere et al., 2012; Voorberg et al., 2015; Strokosch & Osborne, 2020).

On the one hand, the intention of co-production, as voiced by an early seminal proponent of the concept, Elinor Ostrom (1996) is to 'remove artificial walls', 'arising from overly rigid disciplinary walls surrounding the study of human institutions', and 'question dominant axioms and assumptions' (Sardar, 2010, p. 177). As Durose *et al* (2022) point out, co-production began to gain prominence in political science in the late 1970s, understood primarily as the 'mixing of the productive efforts of regular and consumer producers' in public service delivery (Parks et al., 1981, p. 1002). Its core principle is to foster reciprocal exchanges between multiple stakeholders (Duggan 2020), 'in order to generate "synergetic outcome" that would otherwise have been inhibited (Ostrom, 1996, p.1083)' (Durose *et al* 2020, p.3)

On the other hand, the discourse surrounding co-design is also rich in definitions and synonymous terms, which can make it difficult to identify practical examples or to assess their impact. When co-design is broadly defined and implemented as any form of

collaborative or participatory endeavour, it appears that nearly everyone is engaged in it. According to Blomkamp (2018), co-design is a novel method for creatively engaging citizens and stakeholders to find solutions to complex problems. Co-design holds great promise for policy makers. It has been vaunted as a way to generate more innovative ideas, ensure policies and services match the needs of citizens, achieve economic efficiencies by improving responsiveness, foster cooperation and trust between different groups, meaningfully engage the 'hard to reach', and achieve support for change. Therefore, co-design is often framed as a new or different way to address longstanding social challenges that the public sector is failing to address. The term co-design is increasingly common in government discourse, yet a clear and shared definition is lacking. Like co-production, codesign has been 'granted an influential role in the future of . . . public governance on the basis of little formal evidence' (Durose et al. 2017:137). Consequently, co-design risks becoming little more than a buzzword in the public sector.

'Co-production' is the most commonly used concept evoked in the literature based in the origins of the principle of 'collaboration' coming from Ostrom's work with the commons. But as this term is mostly used in the case of products and service delivery or production, it seems more appropriate to use the term 'co-design' for the case of designing nudges.

2.2 Codesigning nudges

Co-design is a promising methodology to tackle not only the potential *boomerang effect* of nudges but also to tackle the large number of paternalistic and ethic critiques that nudges hold. The aim of this approach is to shift the process from a top-down approach to an evolutive bottom-up process, within which citizens' contributions can be supported by lab experiments organised by experts – such an approach is labelled by Richardson &

John (2021) a *nudge-plus*. The inclusion of citizens in the process of construction of nudges may thus increase their ethical acceptability by reducing the paternalistic risk of letting experts decide what is best for others.

Richardson and John (2021) point out that one key problem with expanding the use of nudges which is that it may be another form of paternalism of which critics are rightly suspicious (Jones *et al* 2013; Sugden 2018), because political or scientific experts/elites are in charge of deciding which behaviours are desirable. Therefore, instead of relying on expert judgements about how people should behave, it would be preferable to take into account the views of citizens, and work in partnership with them when designing nudges. Thus, the co-design of nudges sounds promising because, according to the definitions proposed earlier in this section, the fundamental aim of co-design is to find collaboration between citizens and experts.

The interesting point about co-design is that we can easily draw on existing proposals to develop more participatory nudges. For example, one proposed way is to incorporate initiatives for citizen dialogue and deliberation, known as 'thinks' (John et al. 2019). 'Thinks' are participatory initiatives whereby citizens and others discuss policy issues and policy proposals in an open, transparent and reflexive way, such as citizen assemblies discussing how to address climate change. Richardson & John (2021) outline that where nudges and thinks are consciously combined, the intervention can be both a think and a nudge at the same time, coined as a 'nudge plus'. The claim is that such a citizen-driven approach can address the paternalism of nudges head on, and challenge scientific or technical expert-led policymaking (John and Stoker 2019). Hence, the reconceptualisation provided by nudge pluses would suggest that the use of a policy tool that involves citizens working alongside other experts and engaging with scientific evidence in a policy design. My claim is that all these proposals fit in the

conceptualisation of a co-design of nudges. This allows the potential *boomerang effect* and the ethical criticisms of nudging to be addressed *ex ante* rather than *ex post*.

2.3 Bottom-up design of nudges

I have argued above that the failure of social norms nudges can be explained by the epistemic distance between the 'experts' designing the nudge and the real experience of the citizens targeted by the nudge. To prevent such a boomerang effect, a bottom-up rather than top-down approach, based on a co-design of nudges between 'experts' and citizens can prove helpful not only in addressing the epistemic causes of the boomerang effect, but also in increasing nudges' ethical acceptability by reducing the paternalistic risk of letting experts decide what is best for others.

According to Richardson and John (2021), in the top-down approach to designing nudges, one of the arguments in favour of leaving technical experts, such as behavioural scientists, in charge has been based on the cognitive miser claim. That is, understanding how people use heuristics in a cognitively miserly way means understanding that people do not have full access to their own motivations for behaviour, nor can they be relied upon to know what might be good for them, hence the accusations of paternalism. So, there would be little point in consulting with them to see what might be effective for behaviour change policies.

By doing a co-design, we expect to empower citizens by providing them with the opportunity and the space to deliberate about specific policy issues, such as e.g. alcohol abuse or tobacco smoking in the domain of public health. The approach relies on providing information, experiences and therefore data way more adapted to the context of the "ordinary citizens" to the experts. Embracing Richardson and John (2021) 'bottom up' approach, there would be a participatory style of design, with citizen-led ideas for policies, using 'thinks', based on the idea that their lived experience informed the design.

Thinks are broadly defined as deliberative interventions or democratic innovations (Smith 2009), where citizens can get involved in making decisions, such as through citizens' juries, citizens' assemblies, referenda, deliberative polling, participatory budgeting, and other forms where people are engaged in thinking and arguing about policy choices. The underlying idea of Richardson and John (2021), which I fully endorse here, is that people are reflective thinkers who can deliberate on issues in a reasoned way, handling volumes of information, and weighing up complex choices to arrive at decisions. Nudge plus, elaborated through co-design, offers a potential approach to social problem-solving within the framework of a self-guiding society, as outlined by Lindblom (1990). Citizens themselves play an active role in shaping behavioural public policies, contributing their expertise to the process. This perspective challenges top-down policymaking and advocates for a collaborative approach between policy makers and the citizens. As the nudge plus concept of Richardson and John (2021) aims to counter the paternalism often associated with traditional nudges, particularly those that involve manipulation or deception, nudges become more transparent, allowing citizens to better understand the meaning and purpose behind them, as well as their relevance to both personal choices and the collective decisions of others.

A possible shortcoming of a bottom-up approach would be to merely treat expert-citizens as *engineer*-citizens (Meriluoto and Kuokkanen 2022), trained to solve problems, and this without necessarily being involved in the definition of the problem to be tackled (e.g. citizens would work on the actual nudge, without questioning its finality and whether alternative policies might be preferred). It is here essential to consider citizens as experts-citizens, experts by the experience, who can also have their say on the means and ends of the nudge. This will not only procure empowerment to the citizens but also an opportunity

to consent to be oriented towards a specific behaviour. Thus, tackling the fair number of paternalistic critics emanating from nudging.

2.4 Addressing the epistemic causes of the boomerang effect

Co-designing nudges might help to address the problem of *misperceptions* that could lead to the boomerang effect. By confronting experts-citizens (experts by experience) and experts (economists, policy makers etc.) we seek to elucidate what motivates individuals to choose certain behaviours. Hence, the role of this methodology is to measure at which point the norm-nudge receivers can be affected by those misperceptions' *ex ante* creating the nudge. For this, there is an advantage of defining, as Bicchieri and Dimant (2022) do, behaviour in terms of conditional or unconditional preferences and beliefs (expectations). Allowing to independently measure and quantify those primitive constructs and hence norms that can lead also to misperceptions. This bottom-up approach simplifies establishing belief-elicitation protocols that can be used to measure whether individuals hold sufficiently strong empirical and normative expectations in order to determine whether a consensus exists that a norm applies to a specific situation. Making easier to grasp which information, in the form of a norm-nudge, will lead to a behavioural change dodging the boomerang effect, as the expert-citizen will give valuable data about the specific reference network and the potential misperceptions surrounding a specific norm or behaviour.

As the aim of co-designing norm-nudges is to facilitate the suggestion of Mols et al. (2015), since individuals are members of social groups, new norms must be created to successfully change behaviour. Giving space to, as Reijula et al. (2018) pointed out, that policymakers must understand the limitations of nudging, mainly because nudging focuses on *individual* behavioural change, whereas we often want *collective* change. To

achieve such changes, nudging with social information about what others do or approve/disapprove of (in the same context) is the tool used to induce behaviour change (e.g., Allcott 2011). The inclusion of citizens in the process of construction of nudges may thus increase their ethical acceptability by reducing the paternalistic risk of letting experts decide what is best for others.

Furthermore, assuming that 'ordinary citizens' will be more akin to receive public polices co-designed by their peers and not only by experts. This last feature would help directly with the credibility problem cited above. As individuals will find that they are being nudged not only by experts or public policy makers but by their peers too which can happen to be in their reference network may incentivise to 'trust the messenger' leading to a behavioural change. Through this, alleviating the fact that uncertainty about the relevant reference network led citizens to discount information about the (large) percentage of other citizens behaving pro-socially. Because, if a specific behaviour is common in another group, why should one think that it is also common in one's group? Specifying the relevant reference network helps avoid self-serving interpretations which again, lead to norm-nudges that fail.

3. Promises and challenges of co-design

This paper has explored the potential of co-designing behavioural public policies, particularly social norm nudges, to address both their effectiveness and ethical concerns. Traditional nudges, especially those based on social norms, often face the risk of backfiring due to misperceptions and the boomerang effect. This highlights the need for a shift from top-down approaches to more participatory, bottom-up strategies such as the co-design which presents itself as a promising tool. By involving both experts and citizens in the design of nudges, co-design methodologies offer a way to improve transparency thus, trust, ethical acceptability, and policy effectiveness.

While co-design can offer a promising strategy to address the epistemic causes of the boomerang effect, its actual implementation remains far from trivial, in particular regarding the actual process of training citizens during co-design workshops. Indeed, there exists a fundamental tension between, on the one hand, turning participants into experts with a general knowledge of the issue at stake, and on the other hand, harnessing the positioned and local knowledge of citizens on the issue at stake. The former perspective can make sense if we endorse a third-person perspective on the definition of what is ethically acceptable (e.g. find an optimal way to maximise welfare), though the latter is necessary if we endorse a first or second-person perspective (Lecouteux and Mitrouchev 2024). However, the democratic legitimacy of involving citizens in the deliberation emerges from the fact the participants are *representative* of 'ordinary' citizens: a difficulty is that, by gaining some general expertise on the issue, the participants become less 'ordinary citizens' and more 'experts'. A further difficulty is that the participants may eventually endorse views which are very likely akin to those of the experts who 'trained' them ahead of the collective deliberation.

On this note, as pointed out by Richardson and John (2021), by introducing behaviour change policies bottom-up there could be an implied paternalism even when trying to be citizen-led. So, the design of such interventions also needs to take into account the different elements to expertise (Rycroft-Malone et al. 2004; Ives, Damery, and Redwod 2013), including scientific expertise, and other forms of expertise, such as from citizens and policy-makers' direct experiences. Despite its growth, this emerging field remains under-documented, as most studies prioritize reporting design and findings over the processes that inform the research plan. Raising the question of whether: can expert-citizens be both 'experts' and 'citizens' at the same time?

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