



Nudging: How our environment influences our diet

The interview with Jun.-Prof. Dr. Laura König from the University of Bayreuth is about nudging. A change in the environment, e.g. in the kitchen or in the supermarket, can influence the food choices of consumers towards a healthier alternative. Whether a change in behaviour lasts in the long term has not yet been clearly proven.

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KUestions is a video podcast format produced by the Akademie für Neue Medien (Bildungswerk) e.V. and the University of Bayreuth for the project Ernährungsradar. Experts are interviewed on various topics in the context of nutrition and report on the current state of research. The interview was conducted by Matthias Will from the Akademie für Neue Medien (Bildungswerk) e.V. and Clara Marx a Master's student of Lebensmittel- und Gesundheitswissenschaften (Food and Health Sciences) at the University of Bayreuth.

Recommended literature on the topic

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Hollands GJ, Bignardi G, Johnston M, Kelly MP, Ogilvie D, Petticrew M et al. (2017). The TIPPME intervention typology for changing environments to change behaviour. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 1(8), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-017-0140>

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English translation of the German interview transcript

Matthias Will: Welcome to a new episode of our interview series as part of the Ernährungsradar project. The project partners are the University of Bayreuth and the Akademie für Neue Medien. And I'm Matthias Will from the Akademie für Neue Medien

Clara Marx: And I'm Clara Marx from the University of Bayreuth, studying Lebensmittel- und Gesundheitswissenschaften (Food and Health Sciences).

Matthias Will: Today we are guests at the Kulmbacher Mönchshof. And this Kulmbacher Mönchshof not only has a bakery museum, a brewery museum and a spice museum, but also a museum education centre with a show kitchen. And this show kitchen is of course a great setting for our interview today, because today it's all about how our environment influences our diet. Our interviewee is Laura König. She is Professor of Public Health Nutrition at the University of Bayreuth and her research focuses on health psychology and behavioural research in nutrition. Professor König, it's great to have you with us today.

Prof König: Thank you for having me here.

Clara Marx: Our topic today is nudging and I'm sure some of you have heard the word before, but I'm sure many people don't realise what exactly it means. What exactly is a nudge?

Prof König: A nudge is actually not that easy to define, unfortunately. The inventors of the word are Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein. You may have heard of Richard Thaler before, as he actually won the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences for this concept. So what is a nudge? A nudge is any change in our choice environment, for example changes in our kitchen or in the supermarket, which then have an effect on our behaviour. There is one important point to bear in mind, and that is that you should not take away any choice alternatives. In other words, we are generally talking about changes to the position or visibility of products. For example, if I put something on the worktop or in the cupboard here in the kitchen, then I've basically already nudged myself.

Clara Marx: And what specific examples would we already encounter in everyday life?

Prof König: We actually see a lot of this in the supermarket. We've actually been nudged there for decades, we just don't necessarily realise it. For example, if there is a display of goods near the checkout or at the very beginning, perhaps even outside the supermarket gates, then you can actually call it a nudge, because the product is probably also normally available in the supermarket, but it is just somewhere on a shelf between many other products. And so it's simply not as visible to us, it doesn't stand out as much. However, if the product is then placed on such a display, it is suddenly made much more visible to us and we are nudged and perhaps more likely to buy the product.

Matthias Will: Are there any research results that show that nudging works?

Prof. König: There are indeed some studies that show, for example, that the nudges I just mentioned, if you increase the visibility of products, can actually influence the behaviour of consumers in the supermarket, for example, or in cafeterias and canteens. However, the studies are not as conclusive as you might think. Nudging is therefore probably not the new magic bullet for promoting a healthy diet. There are also studies that have shown no effect of nudges. Overall, the bottom line is probably: yes, nudges influence our behaviour, otherwise supermarkets probably wouldn't have been doing this for decades, but the effects are generally not particularly great. So nudging alone will probably not be enough to persuade the world's population to eat more healthily.

Matthias Will: You mentioned the economist Richard Thaler earlier, who coined the term "liberal paternalism" together with Cass Sunstein. So it's about helping people to make better decisions, but not actively influencing and patronising them, in a sense. Is that the right approach?

Prof König: I think it depends very much on what kind of image of humanity you have. Or how you think that we as a society or perhaps also politicians should be allowed to influence our environment and therefore also our behaviour as individuals.

Clara Marx: And what advantages do nudges offer? We've already talked a bit about this, but can you be more specific?

Prof König: The attention aspect seems to be a very important aspect. If we stay with the example of the supermarket, I think we all realise that there are thousands of products, including some products in each individual product category. Which one should I choose? Then there's the fact that when I'm at the supermarket, I don't usually have a lot of time, I just want to do the weekly shop now so that I can get it over with. As a result, I don't want to spend so much time looking at every single product in detail, then weighing them up, perhaps going back to myself and making a decision. Many of the decisions we make in everyday life are based on gut instinct and this is exactly where nudging comes in, it utilises the effect that we often simply reach for the first thing that catches our eye or that is particularly easily accessible, for example. And accordingly, such seemingly subtle changes in our environment can trigger changes in our behaviour.

Matthias Will: But there are also some critics of this concept of nudging. One of them is Gerd Gigerenzer, who used to be an educational researcher at the Max Planck Institute. And he literally rants "Nudging is the philosophy of do-gooders who operate with the means of advertising". What do you say to that?

Prof König: Well, you can see the image of humanity again, which perhaps doesn't think nudges are so good. On the one hand, I would also say that the term "do-gooder" has unfortunately become a bit politically charged. In principle, there's nothing wrong with wanting to do good. I think the concept of nudging simply raises the question of who gets to decide what the good actually is. And that's where opinions differ. Is it me personally who decides what is good and right for me? Or do we sometimes need that little nudge, as nudging is often portrayed, because we are perhaps not always able to see what is good or best for us. Or because we sometimes simply lose sight of it. And people who would agree with this second statement would perhaps say: "Well, perhaps we need politicians or experts who can say objectively or a little more generally for the population from the outside: "This is good" and "This is not so good". And we should then promote these good or better behaviours accordingly. But where I would definitely agree with Gerd Gigerenzer is that yes, the concept itself is not new. It has been repackaged, in a way, and thus brought a little more into the consciousness of the population. But supermarkets have been working for decades on how they should be best structured, where which products should be located so that we do the best thing for the supermarket, namely buy the products that have a large profit margin.

Matthias Will: Do you personally see the danger of a "nanny state"?

Prof König: Personally, I would say no, because we are already being nudged every day. None of us can escape the influences of our environment. Even if I say, ok, I won't go shopping at the supermarket any more, I'll order my groceries online. You can be nudged in exactly the same way. Many principles that work in the physical supermarket work in exactly the same way when you do your shopping online, for example the order in which you see certain products or how some products are highlighted and others are not. Ultimately, you could say that perhaps we are simply trying to use these tools that already exist anyway and that are perhaps not always used to our best advantage. And perhaps also try to create a bit more synergy in cooperation with supermarkets etc.

Clara Marx: Finally, we would like to take another look into the future, because some researchers are calling for "boosting instead of nudging", i.e. focussing a little more on education and training and working on a long-term change. Do you think that would actually be the more sustainable alternative for the future?

Prof König: I don't see it as either/or. Ultimately, we probably need both. We actually still know relatively little about nudges, especially in the area of nutrition. We know some things work, some things don't work. Many studies are inconclusive. So we first need to understand nudges much better. And it is also unclear to what extent these effects can be transferred from one situation to another and how long-lasting these effects actually are. For example, if the cafeteria in my company now starts presenting the fruit basket at the beginning and everything looks good, then I can well imagine that this will have an effect, at least in the first few weeks. But once you've got used to the fruit basket being right at the front and the chocolate bars somewhere at the back, then maybe I'll take the longer route again. We simply don't yet know exactly how this works. In other contexts, however, it can be very helpful if we equip people with this knowledge, as boosting requires, so that they can make better decisions. And that they can perhaps sometimes recognise when someone is trying to lure them onto the wrong track and is using a so-called "sludge". In other words, a nudge that doesn't have the best interests of the person or their health in mind, but is aimed at other aspects that the person may not even have in mind. And it can even be helpful if, for example, I walk through the supermarket and think to myself: "Aha, the display stands there now because it wants to persuade me to buy this product and not another one, even if the other product might be healthier or perhaps even taste better to me."

Matthias Will: Thank you very much, Professor König, for the very interesting and enjoyable interview. Thank you very much for watching and we would be delighted if you could join us for our next interview. Thank you very much.

Clara Marx: Many thanks from me too.

Prof König: Thank you.