



Peer Review Report

PEER REVIEW REPORT FOR:

Correa, A. L., Ames, M. C. F. D. C., & Zappellini, M. B. (2022). Nudge policies in COVID-19 context: A necessary action or ethical dilemma?. *Revista de Administração Contemporânea*, 26(5), e210033. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1982-7849rac2022210033.en>

HOW TO CITE THIS PEER REVIEW REPORT:

Correa, A. L., Ames, M. C. F. D. C., Zappellini, M. B., Afonso, L. E., Curado, M., & Monteiro, S. M. M. (2022). Peer review report for: Nudge policies in COVID-19 context: A necessary action or ethical dilemma?. RAC. *Revista de Administração Contemporânea*. *Zenodo*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6399281>

REVIEWERS:

- Luís Eduardo Afonso (Universidade de São Paulo, FEA, Brazil)
- Manuel Curado (Universidade do Minho, ILCH, Portugal)
- Sérgio Marley Modesto Monteiro (Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, FCE, Brazil)

ROUND 1

Reviewer 1 report

Reviewer: Luís Eduardo Afonso

Date review returned: February 17, 2021

Recommendation: Minor revision

Comments to the authors

The article “Nudge policies in COVID-19 context: a necessary action or ethical dilemma?” is a tour de force, whose objective is “is a theoretical discussion regarding nudges in Coronavirus SARS-Cov-2 pandemic context, bringing back some reflections about ethics and revising them on the new setting imposed by pandemic”. The authors' work can be divided into three parts: the first is a review of the literature on nudges. In the second, the findings of the very recent literature on nudges related to the various efforts and public policies in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic are presented. In the third part, the authors make a timely and necessary reflection on nudges and ethics.

Disclaimer: The content of the Peer Review Report is the full copy of reviewers and authors' reports. Typing and punctuation errors are not edited. Only comments that violate the journal's ethical policies such as derogatory or defamatory comments will be edited (omitted) from the report. In these cases, it will be clearly stated that parts of the report were edited. Check [RAC's policies](#).

The first part is done appropriately. The authors present a critical, almost skeptical, view of the main authors in the area, such as Sunstein. Perhaps they could build more solid foundations of the bridge that makes the connection (or not!) between mainstream economics and behavioral economics, which is presented at the beginning of the work. I think it would be important to discuss in a more profound way resulting from situations in which nudges are useful or not.

The second part bears both the burden and the bonus of pioneering. More consistent studies studying Covid-19 (with the usual exceptions in the medical field) are only now beginning to be published in prominent publication outlets. This means that the relevant literature is not very expressive. Therein lies merit and, at the same time, an element of risk for the soundness of the article. The set of good papers is very small. This means that the authors' narrative review, although comprehensive, found 45 papers, which do not form a homogeneous body of knowledge. Nor do they form, in my opinion, a very solid basis for further reflections. This could be mentioned in the paper. I also think that a more adequate conclusion for this section is lacking here, summarizing the main findings. This would allow for more appropriate targeting and a smoother transition to the discussion section of the article.

One way to improve the analysis of this section would be a brief and cautious digression about other similar situations, particularly in the area of health, where nudges may be relevant and there is a much more consolidated tradition. An almost immediate example is the case of policies aimed at reducing smoking in society. There are immediate similarities (health problems, externalities, public policies, the relationship between individual freedom and government action, ethical issues, etc.). In other words, there is consolidated knowledge, which can enrich the discussion at the end of the article. (On this point, see also the indication of the text by Benartzi et al, 2017.). Note that in the initial part of the article, the authors use some examples related to health. Thus, I believe that this insertion would not be displaced from the rest of the argument.

In the third part, the ethical issues inherent to nudges are discussed in the context analyzed. Even considering that this is an essay, I think that this section could be a little more affirmative and a little more incisive. Perhaps a somewhat comprehensive look at similar policies already in place, with more consolidated literature, would allow the authors to be a little more emphatic in their reflections and conclusions. It is precisely for this reason that I make some indications to complement the references and analysis, particularly in the second part of the paper.

Although the analysis carried out is quite comprehensive, I consider that there are some references that could be added, to fill some gaps and make some improvements in the text, to establish clearly the state of the art literature. All are listed at the end of this review. For each reference, I make a brief comment on how it could be inserted in the text.

Sunstein (2017). The author analyzes precisely the failures of nudges. Very important paper.

Thaler (2018), because this is the author, unless I am mistaken, who presents the term “sludge”, which the authors attribute to Leal & Oliveira (2020).

Berthet & Ouvrard (2019). The authors discuss nudge in broad and narrow sense, based on the original definition by Thaler and Sunstein. Perhaps this more precise conceptualization is important to better qualify the nudges employed in the context of Covid and, mainly, to discuss more appropriately the relevant ethical issues.

Bruns et al. (2018). In the beginning of this text there is an important discussion about the effectiveness of nudges. It would help to shed light and broaden the understanding of nudges related to Covid and, what I consider important, about the transparency of these public policies.

Benartzi et al. (2017). This article, written by a group of outstanding researchers, provides a very complete picture of the effectiveness of nudges made by the public sector. There are also important examples of vaccination campaigns, which are similar and related to other containment measures for Covid.

Additional Questions:

Does the manuscript contain new and significant information to justify publication?: Yes

Does the Abstract (Summary) clearly and accurately describe the content of the article?: Yes

Is the problem significant and concisely stated?: Yes

Are the methods described comprehensively?: Yes

Are the interpretations and conclusions justified by the results?: Yes

Is adequate reference made to other work in the field?: Yes

Is the language acceptable?: Yes

Does the article have data and / or materials that could be made publicly available by the authors?: Not applicable

Please state any conflict(s) of interest that you have in relation to the review of this paper (state “none” if this is not applicable): none

Rating:

Interest: 2. Good

Quality: 1. Excellent

Originality: 2. Good

Overall: 2. Good

Reviewer 2 report

Reviewer: Manuel Curado

Date review returned: March 14, 2021

Recommendation: Minor revision

Comments to the authors

I noticed that the main problem with this article in the translation into English. The author is not a native English-speaking person. There are many sentences that should be reviewed due to this precise reason. As a matter of fact a small number of sentences are not understandable for linguistic reason. I attach to this review the original file and I highlight or underline a few expressions or sentences.

Additional Questions:

Does the manuscript contain new and significant information to justify publication?: Yes

Does the Abstract (Summary) clearly and accurately describe the content of the article?: Yes

Is the problem significant and concisely stated?: Yes

Are the methods described comprehensively?: Yes

Are the interpretations and conclusions justified by the results?: Yes

Is adequate reference made to other work in the field?: Yes

Is the language acceptable?: Yes

Does the article have data and / or materials that could be made publicly available by the authors?: Not applicable

Please state any conflict(s) of interest that you have in relation to the review of this paper (state "none" if this is not applicable).: None.

Rating:

Interest: 1. Excellent

Quality: 3. Average

Originality: 2. Good

Overall: 2. Good

Reviewer 3 report

Reviewer: Sérgio Marley Modesto Monteiro

Date review returned: March 25, 2021

Recommendation: Major revision

Comments to the authors

(There are no comments.)

Additional Questions:

Does the manuscript contain new and significant information to justify publication?: No

Does the Abstract (Summary) clearly and accurately describe the content of the article?: Yes

Is the problem significant and concisely stated?: No

Are the methods described comprehensively?: No

Are the interpretations and conclusions justified by the results?: Not applicable

Is adequate reference made to other work in the field?: Yes

Is the language acceptable?: No

Does the article have data and / or materials that could be made publicly available by the authors?: No

Please state any conflict(s) of interest that you have in relation to the review of this paper (state "none" if this is not applicable).:
Nenhum

Rating:

Interest: 2. Good

Quality: 4. Below Average

Originality: 2. Good

Overall: 4. Below Average

Authors' Responses

We would like to thank the editor and reviewers for the valuable indications to improve our study.

The main changes consisted in strengthening the theoretical background and review the empirical section using the academic bases: Web of Science, Emerald, and Scopus. We also examined the translation, besides fixing the structure as demanded by these improvements.

Comment-by-comment responses:

Answers to decision letter:

Regard translation problems, we fixed the fragments exposed as following:

- Our findings indicate that the most discussed behavior during this period is social influence, and the trend intervention is to send nudging messages. (page 3)

- Also, social influence has a substantial role [...]. (page 6)

- Government persuasion sharing relevant data performed a meaningful role. (page 14)

- Coming from a bad government, nudging out people may be a manipulative power and violates autonomy for promoting decisions in directions different from those that persons would do rationally. (page 8)

- Freedom of choice, liberty, autonomy, and dignity have multiple conceptions, and nudge's moral work depends on selecting the adequate one for each situation. (page 9)

- In the present study, we question nudge's efficiency on the COVID-19 pandemic context by mentioning some setbacks presented in the field's latest literature. (page 3)

- In one experiment run online in the U.K., nudge plus [...]. (page14)

In the section "A glimpse of nudges and its criticism," we explored the concept of paternalism on pages 5 and 6, while we explain Part D from Bush administration on pages 6 and 7.

We follow-up the literature review using Web of Science, Emerald, and Scopus. We compared the most discussed subjects in both samples and kept the same logic to expose papers and connect to the discussion section. (pages 10 to 16)

Sections "COVID-19 and the get back of nudges" and "Nudge policies in COVID-19 context: a necessary action" were structured to follow previous sections' logic and better relate to reflections on the discussion part.

Associate Editor

Strong support from the academic literature is essential in a conceptual paper. However, the structure does not work well (it is structured as an empirical paper) and most of the critical aspects of nudging and ethical dilemmas have not been justified with relevant literature.

We improved sections "A glimpse of nudges and its criticism," "COVID-19 and the get back of nudges", and "Nudge policies in COVID-19 context: a necessary action" and structured all sections with the same logic to a better understanding of the topics explored.

There are no subheadings in the section of ethical dilemmas of nudging and these would be useful to re-structure this section and emphasise the key ethical dilemmas.

We put subheadings on the ethical dilemma section, as seen on pages 19 to 25, to clarify the differences between perspectives.

More detail about the "narrative approach" would be useful as well as clarifying how reviewing 45 articles is different from a regular literature review and maybe some integration around the areas that they cover. It is not clear how the section on ethical dilemmas connects with the results section. It might be useful to make propositions on how nudging could help covid-19 during and post-pandemic.

We follow-up the literature review using Web of Science, Emerald, and Scopus. We compared the most discussed subjects in both samples and better related to the ethical section. (pages 10 to 16)

Reviewer 1

The first part is done appropriately. The authors present a critical, almost skeptical, view of the main authors in the area, such as Sunstein. Perhaps they could build more solid foundations of the bridge that makes the connection (or not!) between mainstream economics and behavioral economics, which is presented at the beginning of the work. I think it would be important to discuss in a more profound way resulting from situations in which nudges are useful or not.

In the first part, we made a bridge with mainstream economics and more classical perspectives on page 4 (second paragraph), page 5 (second and third paragraph).

The second part bears both the burden and the bonus of pioneering. More consistent studies studying Covid-19 (with the usual exceptions in the medical field) are only now beginning to be published in prominent publication outlets. This means that the relevant literature is not very expressive. Therein lies merit and, at the same time, an element of risk for the soundness of the article. The set of good papers is very small. This means that the authors' narrative review, although comprehensive, found 45 papers, which do not form a homogeneous body of knowledge. Nor do they form, in my opinion, a very solid basis for further reflections. This could be mentioned in the paper. I also think that a more adequate conclusion for this section is lacking here, summarizing the main findings. This would allow for more appropriate targeting and a smoother transition to the discussion section of the article.

We follow-up the literature review using Web of Science, Emerald, and Scopus and made clear that it is still not a solid base for conclusions. However, we intended to shed light on some aspects by analyzing the trend topics in this new subject. (pages 10 to 16)

One way to improve the analysis of this section would be a brief and cautious digression about other similar situations, particularly in the area of health, where nudges may be relevant and there is a much more consolidated tradition. An almost immediate example is the case of policies aimed at reducing smoking in society. There are immediate similarities (health problems, externalities, public policies, the relationship between individual freedom and government action, ethical issues, etc.). In other words, there is consolidated knowledge, which can enrich the discussion at the end of the article. (On this point, see also the indication of the text by Benartzi et al, 2017.). Note that in the initial part of the article, the authors use some examples related to health. Thus, I believe that this insertion would not be displaced from the rest of the argument.

We improved the text to make more explicit comparisons between previous experiences and current needs exposed on the COVID-19 studies. We also included Benartzi et al. (2017) reference. (pages 16 and 17)

In the third part, the ethical issues inherent to nudges are discussed in the context analyzed. Even considering that this is an essay, I think that this section could be a little more affirmative and a little more incisive. Perhaps a somewhat comprehensive look at similar policies already in place, with more consolidated literature, would allow the authors to be a little more emphatic in their reflections and conclusions. It is precisely for this reason that I make some indications to complement the references and analysis, particularly in the second part of the paper.

Although this is a theoretical part, the main goal of this section was reflecting upon nudges in the context of the pandemic. That said,

we tried to be more affirmative. (pages 19 to 25).

We would like to thank you for all the references; we are certain that they could make the foundations of our paper more solid. We did not use all because, after the significant changes on the empirical part to suit scientific standard, we were on the limit of words. However, we explain below the criterium for the selection among them.

Sunstein (2017). The author analyzes precisely the failures of nudges. Very important paper.

We mentioned Sunstein in the other two papers about the ethical aspects of nudges.

Sunstein, C. R. (2015). Nudges, Agency, and Abstraction: A Reply to Critics. *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 6(3), 511–529. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13164-015-0266-z>

Sunstein, C. R. (2016). the Ethics of "Nudging." *Yale Journal on Regulation*, 24(6), 27.

Thaler (2018), because this is the author, unless I am mistaken, who presents the term "sludge", which the authors attribute to Leal & Oliveira (2020).

We remove this part without change the paragraph's idea.

Berthet & Ouvrard (2019). The authors discuss nudge in broad and narrow sense, based on the original definition by Thaler and Sunstein. Perhaps this more precise conceptualization is important to better qualify the nudges employed in the context of Covid and, mainly, to discuss more appropriately the relevant ethical issues.

Bruns et al. (2018). In the beginning of this text there is an important discussion about the effectiveness of nudges. It would help to shed light and broaden the understanding of nudges related to Covid and, what I consider important, about the transparency of these public policies.

We considered that our theoretical background, compared to the empirical and discussion sections, was better grounded, so we opted for the references to complement the last two parts.

Benartzi et al. (2017). This article, written by a group of outstanding researchers, provides a very complete picture of the effectiveness of nudges made by the public sector. There are also important examples of vaccination campaigns, which are similar and related to other containment measures for Covid.

Reference added on pages 16 and 17.

Reviewer 2:

We followed all the indications and completed an English revision after finishing all the changes. Thank you for the contributions.

ROUND 2

Reviewer 1 report

Reviewer: Luís Eduardo Afonso

Date review returned: May 19, 2021

Recommendation: Accept

Comments to the authors

(There are no comments.)

Additional Questions:

Does the manuscript contain new and significant information to justify publication?: Yes

Does the Abstract (Summary) clearly and accurately describe the content of the article?: Yes

Is the problem significant and concisely stated?: Not applicable

Are the methods described comprehensively?: Not applicable

Are the interpretations and conclusions justified by the results?: Yes

Is adequate reference made to other work in the field?: Yes

Is the language acceptable?: Yes

Does the article have data and / or materials that could be made publicly available by the authors?: Not applicable

Please state any conflict(s) of interest that you have in relation to the review of this paper (state “none” if this is not applicable).: none

Rating:

Interest: 1. Excellent

Quality: 2. Good

Originality: 1. Excellent

Overall: 1. Excellent

Reviewer 2 report

Reviewer: Sérgio Marley Modesto Monteiro

Date review returned: June 07, 2021

Recommendation: Accept

Comments to the authors

(There are no comments.)

Additional Questions:

Does the manuscript contain new and significant information to justify publication?: Yes

Does the Abstract (Summary) clearly and accurately describe the content of the article?: Yes

Is the problem significant and concisely stated?: Yes

Are the methods described comprehensively?: Yes

Are the interpretations and conclusions justified by the results?: Not applicable

Is adequate reference made to other work in the field?: Yes

Is the language acceptable?: Yes

Does the article have data and / or materials that could be made publicly available by the authors?: Not applicable

Please state any conflict(s) of interest that you have in relation to the review of this paper (state “none” if this is not applicable).: Nenhum.

Rating:

Interest: 2. Good

Quality: 2. Good

Originality: 2. Good

Overall: 2. Good

Authors' Responses

Thank you for the comments and the contributions to improve our paper. We appreciated the attention to developing our manuscript. To fully engage in the reviews, we changed the structure and deepened some arguments.

This last review aimed to make clearer explicit the paper's idea by adding headings and sub-headings. As remarked by reviewer 1 of the first review, the article is divided into three parts, and we created new subheadings to better connected them. That said, the new structure is:

First part: Theoretical foundation. Review of the literature on nudges.

Introduction (p. 2)

A Glimpse of Nudges and its Criticism (p.3)

What is Nudge? (p.3)

Nudges applied to Public Policy (p.4)

The Rise of Ethical Questioning (p.7)

Ethical Questions Regarding Autonomy (p.8)

Ethical Questions Regarding Dignity (p.9)

Ethical Questions Regarding the Welfare (p.9)

Second part: Narrative review. Recent literature on nudges applied to public policies in the COVID-19 pandemic context.

COVID-19 and the Get Back of Nudges (p.10)

Methods (p.11)

Results (p.12)

Trend Subjects (p.14)

 Trend Strategy: Nudge Messages (p.14)

 Trend Goal: Increase Commitment (p.16)

Nudge Policies in COVID-19 context: a Necessary Action (p.18)

 Avoid Fake News (p.18)

 Promote Hand Hygiene (p.19)

 Maintain Social Distance (p.20)

Third part: Discussion. Reflection on nudges ethical aspects.

Discussion (p.21)

Nudge Policies in COVID-19 Context: Ethical Dilemma (p.21)

The Ethical Dilemmas autonomy, dignity, and welfare Under Ethics Perspective (p.21)

Nudge as a Utilitarian Choice (p.23)

The Deontological Argument for Nudges (p.24)

Virtue Ethics as the Primary Purpose of Nudging People (p.25)

Conclusion (p.27)

We reallocated some paragraphs after creating the new structure of headings and sub-headings, so the rounded argument is also more evident. The first part gives the theoretical background to the nudges exemplified in the second section. The ethical questioning mentioned returns to the paper on the third part when we bring the ethical perspectives to analyze nudges.

The second part presents a narrative review to update nudges applied to public policies, now in the COVID-19 pandemic context. We improved this section by better explaining the methodology with two tables: one summarizing the process of the paper's selection (page 12) and the other showing trend subjects on both samples (page 13). The methodology was also improved by clarifying how the systematic search validated the pattern found on the exploratory search. These trends were related to nudge theory and also mentioned as a practical example in the ethical discussion.

In the third part, we return to do the ethical questioning through the lens of ethical perspectives. Nudges are discussed through utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics theories, and the trends mentioned in the second part are brought back as practical examples of the arguments developed.

Comment-by-comment responses:

Answers to the Associate Editor:

For example, the first section on "A glimpse of Nudges and its criticism" could use subheadings to help to follow a very complex argument, so the different debates raised are more direct, the link informing covid is more explicit and it is easier for the reader to fully unpack the contribution of this work.

We created the following sub-headings:

- What is Nudge? (p.3): a brief explanation of the nudge theory.
- Nudges applied to Public Policy (p.4): explanation of nudges applied to public policies and libertarian paternalism.
- The Rise of Ethical Questioning (p.7): we raise the three most prominent ethical questioning and the manipulation problem.

Ethical Questions Regarding Autonomy (p.8)

Ethical Questions Regarding Dignity (p.9)

Ethical Questions Regarding the Welfare (p.9)

In the section on methodology, a table could summarise nicely the process of papers' selection. In this way, instead aspects such as listing in page 17 the papers that overlapped with Google scholar or discussed nudges, so the discussion could be simplified. It says that the Google sample was validated in this research, and it is not clear how.

We included two Tables on pages 12 and 13 to make the process more transparent.

Also, in the "results" section subheadings would enhance readability and improve the structure of this manuscript and enhance readability. For example, in page 15, the authors mention trend subjects. These trends could be signposted and relevant sub-headings throughout the section (reflecting the content of each trend) to introduce and emphasise the identified trends more effectively. This clarification would be useful to highlight the contribution of the study later.

The trend subjects are divided into sub-headings from pages 14 to 16. We exposed them following the structure of Table 2 on page 13. In the section "Nudge Policies in COVID-19 context: a Necessary Action" from pages 18 to 20, we discussed other subjects exposed in the paper's sample since they overlap with theories presented in the first part of the study.

Also, the discussion section could integrate the connections between the theory on nudging (e.g. ethical dilemmas) and the trends identified in the results section for a rounded argument. This could be done throughout the text and headings. Sections such as "ethical dilemmas" hardly consider nudging in the context of covid, which is a central aspect to be incorporated in the discussion.

Finally, read carefully the manuscript for some inconsistencies. For example, statements such as "behavioural economics is one of the most recent decision-making studies that..." should say something like "research approaches" instead to avoid misinterpretations of this claim (page 8 line 50).

Correction: "Behavioral economics is one of the most recent decision-making research approaches that challenge the traditional notion by offering a more realistic perspective." (p. 4)

However, there is scope for further improvement by fully engaging with the comments raised in previous reviews around the structure of the paper, methodology and connection between nudging in the discussion to highlight the contribution of this research.

That said, we went through the previous review and made some improvements as exposed in the sequence:

Answers to the Associate Editor from the first review letter:

There are no subheadings in the section of ethical dilemmas of nudging and these would be useful to re-structure this section and emphasise the key ethical dilemmas.

We added the sub-heading "The Rise of Ethical Questioning" on page 7 to clarify the dilemmas discussed in the discussion section.

More detail about the "narrative approach" would be useful as well as clarifying how reviewing 45 articles is different from a regular literature review and maybe some integration around the areas that they cover. It is not clear how the section on ethical dilemmas connects with the results section. It might be useful to make propositions on how nudging could help covid-19 during and post-pandemic.

The section "Method" was modified, and two tables explain the paper's search and how this literature review is different from a regular one. The ethical dilemmas are connected to this section since the trends exemplify the arguments developed in the discussion section.

Answers to Reviewer 1 from the first review letter:

The second part bears both the burden and the bonus of pioneering. More consistent studies studying Covid-19 (with the usual exceptions in the medical field) are only now beginning to be published in prominent publication outlets. This means that the relevant literature is not very expressive. Therein lies merit and, at the same time, an element of risk for the soundness of the article. The set of good papers is very small. This means that the authors' narrative review, although comprehensive, found 45 papers, which do not form a homogeneous body of knowledge. Nor do they form, in my opinion, a very solid basis for further reflections. This could be mentioned in the paper. I also think that a more adequate conclusion for this section is lacking here, summarizing the main findings. This would allow for more appropriate targeting and a smoother transition to the discussion section of the article.

We included a Table on page 12 to explain the process of papers' search, and the pattern found is better exposed on Table 13. We made clear that this is not a solid basis for conclusions, but we used these shreds of evidence as practical examples to ground the nudge theory. The subheadings divided the trends in a way that is better to link with the discussion and conclusion sections.

One way to improve the analysis of this section would be a brief and cautious digression about other similar situations, particularly in the area of health, where nudges may be relevant and there is a much more consolidated tradition.

This digression was made in the section "Nudge Policies in COVID-19 context: a Necessary Action" from pages 18 to 20. We discussed some trends of nudges that overlap with aspects already presented in the theoretical section.

In the third part, the ethical issues inherent to nudges are discussed in the context analyzed. Even considering that this is an essay, I think that this section could be a little more affirmative and a little more incisive. Perhaps a somewhat comprehensive look at similar policies already in place, with more consolidated literature, would allow the authors to be a little more emphatic in their reflections and conclusions.

We improved the ethical discussion by relating to the ethical dilemmas from the theoretical background of the first part and the findings from the narrative review. This way, we were more emphatic in the reflections.