

Why better choices depend on 'libertarian paternalism'

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Nudging people toward better behavior through policy can be effective, but can face resistance if people feel their autonomy is threatened.

Despite advances in neuroscience and genetics that raise questions about the limitations of free will, [people](#) hold strongly to their sense of autonomy, according to a study by University of Florida marketing professor Joe Alba and post-doctoral student Yanmei Zheng.

Alba's and Zheng's work, co-authored with Cornell University professor and former UF marketing Ph.D. student Stijn van Osselaer, is not an analysis of whether free will exists, but rather an examination of our impressions of free will, and the implications of those impressions on opinions regarding policy.

"It's a ripe question because developments in the sciences seem to throw more and more challenges to the notion that we have free will," Alba said.

Alba and Zheng conducted a series of experiments in which participants were asked to gauge an individual's personal control in a variety of situations. In one experiment, Alba and Zheng compared responses based on four behaviors: obesity, shoplifting, financial fraud, and drunk driving.

The study found that people were more likely to accept obesity as a consequence resulting outside the individual's control (perhaps based on

a poor metabolism) than the other three behaviors—despite the fact that the authors included similar genetic and environmental forces in each scenario.

Similar findings were present in the study's other experiments. The study found, for the most part, that people believe free will—even in the face of significant physical constraints—would prevent them from engaging in unethical behavior.

"When we pose questions like, 'Why wouldn't you behave in this way under these physical constraints?'" said Alba, "they start to appeal to their nonphysical mind or to their superior soul. So they'll have noncorporeal (non-physical) explanations of their decisions."

The findings support the philosophy of libertarian paternalism, an idea that blends organizational intervention with people's desire for freedom of choice, as a guide for policy makers. Considering the study's findings of people's steadfast belief in free will, Alba said [policy makers](#) must be careful to not threaten autonomy, even if it is for the public good. Alba cites New York City's efforts to ban the sale of 16-plus-ounce [sugary drinks](#) in 2014. Although studies have linked sugary drinks to obesity, the ban was overturned by the New York State Court of Appeals.

"[Policy makers] want to create contingencies in the environment for people to behave in a better way," Alba said. "But people don't like being manipulated. So the dilemma for the policy maker is how do I get people to behave better without them feeling their autonomy is threatened? That's a hard problem to solve. Because once people detect that you're putting constraints on them—even though you're doing it for their own good—they rebel against it."

Alba said the subtle nudges of libertarian paternalism provide a potential solution to this dilemma. A classic example of libertarian paternalism is

the "opt-in vs. opt-out" arrangement where, for example, a company enrolls an employee in its 401K program unless the employee expressly exempts himself or herself. The situation blends the company's intention of doing what's best for the employee while still allowing the employee the freedom to say no.

"When you cast doubts on the existence of free will, you shake people's worldview," Alba said. "The notion that we don't have free will is not only counterintuitive but also threatening to people's notions of their essence."

The study, "Belief in Free Will: Implications for Practice and Policy," appears in the December issue of the *Journal of Marketing Research*.

More information: Yanmei Zheng et al. Belief in Free Will: Implications for Practice and Policy, *Journal of Marketing Research* (2016). [DOI: 10.1509/jmr.15.0452](https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.15.0452)

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