

This week we began to explore how to initiate norm change. Unlike mere attitude change, norm change requires engagement with the complex expectations characteristic of goal-directed strategic interaction. While painstaking deliberation and ground-clearing may be required to initiate a process of norm change, once begun a norm can change quite quickly, once a critical threshold has been passed and expectations that others are changing become mutually reinforcing.

The World Bank (2015) proposes that human decision-making is governed by three principles: thinking automatically, thinking socially, and thinking with mental models. They argue that most choices are made automatically, not deliberately. Similarly, they argue that thinking is social and depends crucially on our perceptions of others' perceptions – strategic interaction. Finally, they assert that the mental models we use to make sense of the world have a dramatic impact on norm accretion and change. They suggest a “mind, society and behavior” intervention framework to change mental models.

Gerald Mackie (1996, 2018) argues that for beneficial social norm change to occur, a critical mass of people must begin to believe that others are changing their behavior and expectation. He distinguishes between brute and institutional facts, pointing out that social norms are based on reference groups of relevant others, and that these reference groups in turn arise from the uniquely human capacity of joint attention. Crucially, norm change is a harder task than simply changing individual attitudes – changing beliefs about what *others* will do or approve of is primary.

Mackie's Tostan model emphasizes the formation of new reference groups, in the form of Community Empowerment Programs (CEPs). The core group engages in evaluative deliberations, possibly over several years, and once the core group has decided to make the norm change, they engage in organized diffusion to peer social units. For example, UNICEF's Community Action for Total Sanitation (CATS) seeks to promote community ownership of the norm change process, serving as an entry point for wider community mobilization. Communications content is notably positive and community-focused. Similarly, the NGOs Saleema and KMG Self-Help are attempting to end FGC in Ethiopia and Sudan by redundantly demonstrating “that enough people see that enough people are changing,” relying on organized diffusion to spread the message (in their case of coordinated abandonment of a harmful practice). The expectation that most peers have

given up the practice becomes self-fulfilling. However, a frequent obstacle in these programs is that particular harmful processes may be caused by several mutually-reinforcing social norms. All these organizations stress the need to develop the agency of the populations concerned.

In a gripping account of norm change, Yvonne Riaño tells the story of Bogotá mayor Antanas Mockus's intentional and largely successful program of reform. Mockus achieved these effects through the harmonization of moral, social and legal norms, appealing to a "culture of citizenship" (*cultura ciudadana*) and publicly shaming those who did not voluntarily make prosocial contributions. As Mockus put it, "we can teach each other to be better citizens." Riaño argues that prioritization of social coexistence over economic profit coupled with investment in education and culture and a decentralized political system created an environment where comprehensive programs of norm change stood a reasonable chance of succeeding.

Systematic and deliberate norm change is of great interest to public health advocates. Kumar et al (2015) cite the "black box" of family health behaviors as the major obstacle to reduction of infant mortality, and they recommend reform of the content, context and process of health interventions to improve uptake. Specifically, they call for leveraging existing "beliefs, practices, people, context and skills".

The social norm of legal obedience is a crucial prerequisite for the rule of law. Mackie proposes a contextually-variable approach, building on the insights of Mockus's *cultura ciudadana*. Mackie argues against legal centralism, the idea that the law is the best way to bring about social change and reduce social harm. In Mackie's view, laws are only obeyed when they are consonant with existing social and moral norms, and legal centralism thus overlooks important moral and social motivations for obedience. Legal obedience is principally the result of invisible extralegal sanctions, both social and moral, and when these are absent law is dramatically less effective. Mackie writes that the proper remedy for a harmful social norm is "organized social change" rather than fault, blame or punishment. To overcome a culture of legal disobedience, reciprocal expectations must be shifted from disobedience to obedience, which involves publicizing compliance and shaming violators in the spirit of *cultura ciudadana*. Mackie proposes that laws can gradually influence morality via a mechanism called the legal-social-legal ratchet, whereby gradual

and moderate change in laws causes internalization of new social norms, which over time enable further (gradual) extension of the law. He cites antismoking campaigns as a prominent example of this process. However, when the results of this long process are transplanted to a new cultural context, noncompliance (and non-enforcement) are common.

Recent work has suggested that incremental policies for norm change may end in a “social trap” equilibrium. Bo Rothstein argues that the social norm of corruption has been improperly understood as a principal-agent problem when it is actually a (simpler) coordination problem. He agrees that expectations are central, and that anticorruption strategies must be broad, sudden and irreversible. He cites the example of Swedish anticorruption reforms, which were indeed broad, sudden and irreversible. Crucial to this example were a severe external threat and widespread generalized trust.

Of the readings this week, only Mackie tackles the paternalistic implications of norm manipulation from City Hall. He argues that top-down norm change can be justified on the basis of harm prevention, particularly in non-binding pedagogical forms. This is the territory of Thaler and Sunstein’s *Nudge*. However, there seems to be a modest contradiction between the impulse to increase agency and the impulse to prevent harm by changing behavior. Even larger questions remain, particularly concerning the intersection of mass surveillance, facial recognition algorithms and norm enforcement. In an era where China’s Orwellian social credit system<sup>1</sup> would appear to be enacting most of Mockus’s (and Mackie’s) best practices (including public praise and shame), Mill’s harm principle provides scant guidance for the propriety of such social engineering. I submit that the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century gives us a much more sobering perspective on its utility.

---

<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_Credit\\_System](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Credit_System)  
[https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/03/21/what-do-people-china-think-about-social-credit-monitoring/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.30cfff491be](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/03/21/what-do-people-china-think-about-social-credit-monitoring/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.30cfff491be)