

This week we explored various types of social interaction and attempted to develop a typology on the basis of their directionality. We tried to understand the interaction of habits, regularities and norms, and we continued our study of how norms change over time. A major theme was the difference between one-way dependence and bidirectionality, and the differential effects that result in cases of innovation diffusion and norm diffusion.

Mackie et al.'s typology reflects a progressively increasing complexity in the directionality of social interaction. Personal attitudes, population regularities and moral norms arise internally and are not externally directed or imposed. Weakly social interactions such as the use of social proof or social heuristics to make decisions are unidirectional or one-way empirical, in the sense that the actor bases her decisions on the actions of others but does not believe that this will inform others' attitudes toward her. By contrast, strongly social interactions like social norms (and including coordination and cooperation norms) are polydirectional, in the sense that one follows a rule because one believes that others do (weakly social) and because one believes that others believe one should follow it. Finally, institutional and legal norms are formal, legitimate, explicit, and enforceable by coercion. But how much of this behavior can we say is consciously chosen, and how much is purely habit?

Wood and Runger propose a model where tacitly held habits interact with explicitly held goal-oriented behavior in three ways. First, habits are formed as people repeat particular actions in performance contexts.¹ Second, explicit goal pursuit is mentally taxing, and habits provide primary, baseline responses to stimuli that interact with goal-directed behavior only when necessary. Third, since habits are tacitly held and "inaccessible to introspection," we must infer the reasons for our behavior, and we usually infer that we had strong underlying motivations or goals to continue engaging in the habit. Changing habits can be accomplished by interventions designed to prevent the cuing of unwanted habits as well as the promotion of desired behavior into a habit. Since habit performance is especially impaired after a shift in context, discontinuities in context can be exploited to change habits. The authors suggest that apparently high self-control may simply be a matter of husbanding the scarce resource of explicit goal pursuit by encoding goal-directed behavior into habits.

¹ Our explicitly-held goals may bias habit formation.

We can consider norm diffusion by looking at how other ideas diffuse through populations. Everett Rogers attempts to give an explanation for differential rates of innovation diffusion, defined as the rate with which an innovation is communicated among the members of a social system. It seems that social norms may diffuse in an analogous manner. He argues that differentiation can be explained on the basis of five factors: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and observability. Homophilous communication is more likely to occur than heterophilous communication, but at least some heterogeneity is required for innovations to exist at all, so the ideal is some but not too much heterophily. Innovations diffuse in an S-curve, with rapid diffusions showing steeper curves. The structure of a particular social system can also hinder or facilitate transmission, over and above the effects of its individual elements.² The decision to adopt or reject an innovation can be made at the individual level, collectively by a group, or imposed from above by a coercive authority. But how exactly are these decisions to adopt made?

In an attempt to answer this question, Robert Cialdini enunciates the principle of social proof, stating that we sometimes determine what is correct by reference to others' apparent beliefs about what is correct. While this heuristic is often useful, it can be manipulated, and Cialdini gives the examples of canned laugh tracks and advertising language like "fastest-growing" or "best-selling". He cites research showing that the best way to disabuse someone of a phobia is to show them social proof of multiple similarly-situated peers undergoing the experience. We are most likely to accept social proof in ambiguous situations where we are unsure of ourselves. When most people in a given situation are looking to one another for social proof, a bizarre feedback mechanism can develop, which Cialdini calls "pluralistic ignorance. Cialdini stresses that social proof is most operative when the others are similar to us and we have no alternatives, instancing the Jonestown mass suicides and the Werther effect in nineteenth century Europe.

In contrast to Rogers' purposive account of innovation diffusion, Paul Harris argues that cognitive development in young children is necessarily open-ended rather than progressive, with no inevitable march toward objectivity and enlightenment. Indeed, children often incorporate culturally-specific beliefs about origin and purpose completely on

² It is interesting that Rogers defines many of his variables (rate of adoption, for instance) by reference to "innovation in a system, rather than for an individual as the unit of analysis". This move sets up a conflict with methodological individualism.

trust, with a willingness to tolerate a certain degree of cognitive dissonance if those ideas prove fundamentally incompatible.³ Young children are also susceptible to the phenomenon of overimitation, where they will incorporate an otiose or irrelevant procedure into a simpler task if told to, and will then attribute normative content to that procedure. As Harris puts it “our taste for rules and rituals...comes naturally”. Harris speculates that children are evolutionarily primed to ask questions and engage in social learning, and that most developmental psychology has ignored the social despite its apparent primacy in actual learning. Children do not learn indiscriminately, however, and favor instructors who are familiar, who are members of their own cultural group, and who abide by its norms, including reciprocity.⁴

In a similar vein, Kwame Anthony Appiah makes the point that our beliefs are ultimately founded on authority, either directly or by reference to other beliefs which are themselves founded on authority. This means that response to stimulus will differ on the basis of preexisting beliefs. He cites the Duhem thesis to the effect that theories are undetermined by the available evidence, allowing for multiple competing explanations for phenomena. Appiah suggests that the methods of the natural sciences have not led to advances in values, with the result that moral engagement with other cultures would be constructive.

It seems to me that we have not fully resolved Searle’s paradox concerning the objective force of ultimately subjective social norms. Humans are often credited with being able to shape our own environment, but it seems that the most profound shaping is collective and unconscious, resulting in a social environment that appears objective and fairly restrictive to any given individual. So far, the findings of this research program appear to diminish individual agency⁵, which ought to preclude individual attempts to change social norms. However, this doesn’t square with numerous examples in human history of deliberately chosen norm change, from the Roman censors to the rapid American pivot on gay marriage. We have yet to explain how, on occasion, individuals and small groups can deliberately effect radical changes in prevalent social norms.

³ Adults also seem to be able to tolerate a great deal of cognitive dissonance.

⁴ Compare with Socrates’ “philosophical dogs” – Plato, *Republic* II 375d-376b

⁵ In the sense that they imply that norm change comes about as a result of long-term processes rather than individual action.