Perverse Social Norms

Ahmed Skali, Benno Torgler, and Erez Yoeli

Abstract:

Social norms, integral to societal behaviour, provide conduct guidelines and shape interactions. While often adaptive in the sense that they provide a solution to past or current problem or even well-intended from the people driving them, these norms can sometimes lead to unintended negative outcomes, especially when influenced by rapid technological and societal changes. The article delves into the emergence of "perverse social norms", where well-intentioned practices might not align with long-term societal welfare. Examples such as "aspirational recycling" or the overly "coddling" of society illustrate the tangible consequences of these misaligned norms and the potential drawbacks. With major socio-economic events often outpacing formal legislative responses, behavioural economics could provide a potential toolkit to navigate and rectify such evolving perverse norms, ensuring that societal welfare remains paramount.

Social norms serve as crucial regulatory mechanisms in society, influencing and shaping individual behaviours. These norms, which function as parameters for acceptable conduct, are internalized within societal members through ongoing social interactions (Parsons and Shils, 1951), facilitating a process termed as socialization (Williams, 1968).

While social norms play an instrumental role in guiding behaviour within societies, and while norms typically emerge as a coordination device geared towards solving particular problems, social norms do not necessarily prescribe socially efficient actions, as third party punishments (Fehr and Fishbacher, 2004) can motivate *any* individually costly action, irrespective of its benefit to others—a phenomenon sometimes referred to as "anything goes" (Osborne and Rubinstein, 1994). Additionally, social norms may prescribe actions that are beneficial for one group at the expense of another group, as in the case of norms that support warfare (Mathew and Boyd, 2011) or racism. For instance, social norms which forbade engaging in business with blacks in the Jim Crow South benefitted whites while harming blacks (and shopkeepers).

Moreover, social norms can sometimes prescribe behaviours with downright perverse implications. *Perverse* social norms are those norms which are counterproductive, or downright

harmful, to the welfare of society. Perverse norms generate incentives to behave in ways that are incompatible with solving the problem the norms are intended to solve. Such outcomes can be classified under the category of "counterproductive" social norms. A salient example of such a social norm emerges in the realm of environmental conservation, particularly recycling. It is observed that some individuals engage in "aspirational recycling", a behaviour driven by the commendable objective of minimizing landfill waste. In these instances, individuals, driven by their desire to contribute positively, recycle items without verifying their recyclability. For example, people will put metal clothes hangers or plastic film in the plastic bin out of a desire that these items will be recycled alongside metal cans and hard plastics, even though, in many jurisdictions, this is not the case. This well-intentioned act often leads to damage to recycling machinery, as well as contamination of the recycling stream, rendering entire batches unrecyclable and paradoxically causing them to be discarded into landfills due to the prohibitive costs of decontamination. Such contamination rates have seen an uptick in recent years, underscoring the societal repercussions of ill-informed norms.[1]

This phenomenon is not exclusive to environmental practices. Overprotectiveness, while rooted in the noble sentiment of others' welfare, can, for instance, metamorphose into "paternalistic discrimination", as strikingly illustrated in ongoing work by Buchmann, Sullivan, and Meyer (2023) wherein employers discriminate against female applicants for a night-shift job out of concerns for these applicants' safety. In organizational settings, performance management systems, despite their intent to bolster productivity and efficiency, can inadvertently foster behaviours such as gaming, information manipulation, selective attention, illusion of control, and even disruptions in social relationships (Franco-Santos and Otley, 2018). Moreover, well-intentioned diversity initiatives can sometimes yield counterproductive results, leading to unforeseen challenges or issues (Leslie, 2019; Dover et al., 2020).

In essence, while the genesis of certain social norms might be grounded in beneficence and collective welfare, their practical manifestations can sometimes diverge from intended outcomes. This risk may be particularly great when norms change, as it may take time for society to iron out the kinks, so to say. It may be exacerbated when individuals receive

---

[1] In this particular case, the problem may be partially informational. In other words, it is possible that some people make errors in recycling because they are not well informed as to what is recyclable. However, what we are describing here is (specifically) *over-recycling*, i.e. a willingness to assume an object without verification, which wilfully errs on the side of complying with the norm that one is expected to recycle as much as possible.

individual benefits from third-party punishment of norm violations, e.g., via so-called "virtue signaling" (Jordan et al. 2016)

In contemporary societal discourse, concerns about an over-coddled and excessively sheltered population are gaining prominence, suggesting that the progress in certain domains might inadvertently lead to unintended consequences in others. Haidt and Lukianoff (2018) highlight the dual-edged nature of hyperconnectivity enabled by technological advancements. While such connectivity facilitates instantaneous and cost-free communication, it has potential repercussions on societal mental well-being, especially among the youth. One discernible consequence of adapting to this hyperconnected world is a lowered threshold for what society perceives as intolerable risk or discomfort (Haslam, 2016). This adaptation, in turn, has propelled a demand for heightened emotional security and "safe spaces". However, this escalating "safetyism" has its drawbacks.

Drawing attention to academic environments, Haidt and Lukianoff underscore the influence of this protective impulse on university dynamics. Manifestations of this include the disinvitation of scholars from debates to shield students from potential discomfort, a surge in open letters condemning colleagues, and a noticeable uptick in defensive self-censorship. The authors emphasize that such protective measures compromise the very essence of academic institutions: a platform where diverse scholarly perspectives challenge and nullify mutual biases, ensuring that ideas endure rigorous debate—a concept they describe as "institutionalized disconfirmation" (p. 109). This protective oversight, likened to "academic helicopter parenting", can inadvertently result in students developing cognitive distortions, becoming more vulnerable, anxious, and hypersensitive. The larger academic community, as cited by Revers and Traunmüller (2020), is also witnessing increased complications in campus speech codes, disinvitations, vehement protests, and even dismissals of controversial academic figures.

However, the discourse surrounding "political correctness" is not exclusive to this era. While contemporary narratives might posit that the concern over excessive political correctness is a recent phenomenon, historical analyses suggest otherwise. As illustrated in Fig. 1, debates on political correctness have historical roots, tracing back as early as the 1780s. For instance, Hermann von Thile, the inaugural foreign secretary of Germany in 1869, emphasized the need for a "politically correct" Catholic theologian in specific commissions[2] (p. 245. Additionally,

---

[2] See Les Discourse parlementaires du prince de Bismarck (1887)

the Annual Register 1807, History of Europe cites concerns over the political correctness of the Danish government in the context of their dealings with Napoleon. These references underline that the boundaries of acceptable discourse have been in flux throughout history, evolving with every generation.
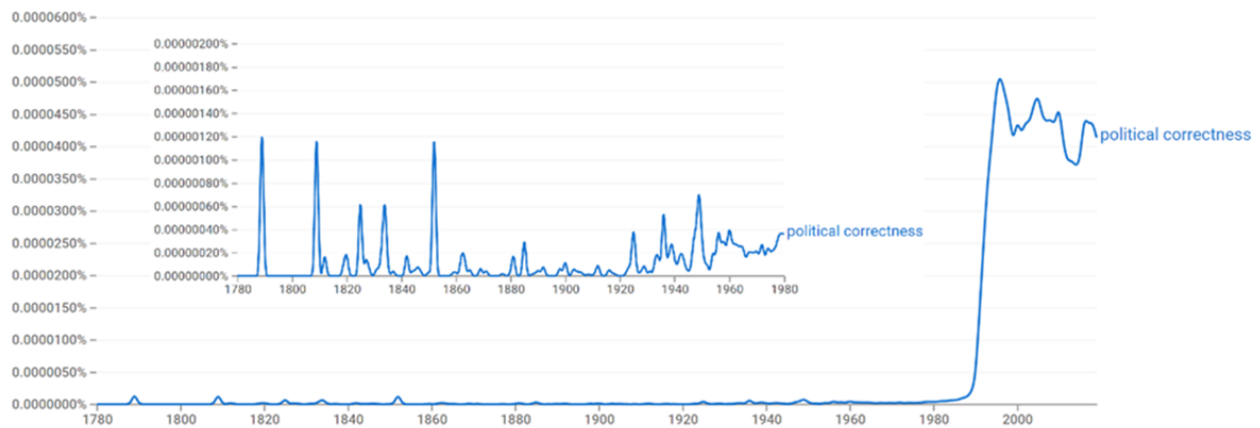

Figure 1: Concerns with political correctness derived Google Ngram Viewer (accessed 27/11/2020). Y-axis: relative frequency of the phrase "political correctness" appearing in the sample of books written in English in the Google Book corpus, among all bigrams.

Perverse social norms often emerge at the intersection of rapid technological advancements and the sluggish pace of legislative response. With large-scale socio-economic and political events frequently outstripping society's capacity for adaptation, the formalization process – wherein evolving behaviours are codified into public policy – tends to lag. However, human behaviours do not pause, awaiting formal directives. Instead, individuals and communities organically modify their behaviours in response to emergent phenomena, sometimes leading to the establishment of perverse norms[3].

The comprehension of how these adverse norms originate, and their subsequent evolution, is crucial. If well-intentioned norms inadvertently evolve into forms that are detrimental or impose undue costs upon society, recognizing and addressing them becomes imperative. Herein lies the significance of academic research in fields such as behavioural

---

[3] Furthermore, it is worth noting the discourse surrounding "kludges", which represent marginal adaptations employed to mitigate inherent design inefficiencies. However, the aggregation of such "kludges" can lead to the manifestation of suboptimal behaviours (Ely, 2011).

economics, psychology, cultural evolution, sociology, and so on, which could offer invaluable insights into shifting norms. By leveraging insights from these fields, societies can potentially navigate the intricate maze of evolving norms. Its methodologies and frameworks could serve as a robust toolkit, aiding societies in both understanding and rectifying these undesirable social norms, ensuring a harmonious balance between progress and societal welfare.

References

Bicchieri, C. (2005). *The grammar of society: The nature and dynamics of social norms*. Cambridge University Press.

Boyd, R. (2018). *A different kind of animal: how culture transformed our species*. Princeton University Press.

Buchmann, N., Sullivan, C., & Meyer, C. (2023). Paternalistic Discrimination. *Stanford University Working Paper.*

Dover, T. L., Kaiser, C. R., & Major, B. (2020). Mixed signals: The unintended effects of diversity initiatives. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 14(1), 152-181.

Dulleck, U., Fooken, J., Newton, C., Ristl, A., Schaffner, M., & Torgler, B. (2016). Tax compliance and psychic costs: Behavioral experimental evidence using a physiological marker. *Journal of Public Economics*, 134, 9-18.

Elster, J. (1989). Social norms and economic theory. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 3(4), 99-117.

Ely, J. C. (2011). Kludged. *American Economic Journal: Microeconomics*, 3(3), 210-231.

Fehr, E., & Fischbacher, U. (2004). Third-party punishment and social norms. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 25(2), 63-87.

Erard, B., & Feinstein, J., 1994. The Role of Moral Sentiments and Audit Perceptions in Tax Compliance. *Public Finance,* 49, 70–89.

Franco-Santos, M., & Otley, D. (2018). Reviewing and theorizing the unintended consequences of performance management systems. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 20(3), 696-730.

Haidt, J, & Lukianoff, G. (2018). *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure*. London: Penguin UK.

Haslam, N. (2016). Concept creep: Psychology's expanding concepts of harm and pathology. *Psychological Inquiry*, 27(1), 1-17.

Jordan, J. J., Hoffman, M., Bloom, P., & Rand, D. G. (2016). Third-party punishment as a costly signal of trustworthiness. *Nature*, 530(7591), 473-476.

Leslie, L. M. (2019). Diversity initiative effectiveness: A typological theory of unintended consequences. *Academy of Management Review*, 44(3), 538-563.

Mathew, S., & Boyd, R. (2011). Punishment sustains large-scale cooperation in prestate warfare. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 108(28), 11375-11380.

Osborne, M. J., & Rubinstein, A. (1994). *A course in game theory*. MIT press.

Parsons, T. and Shils, E.A. (Eds.) (1951). *Toward a general theory of action*. Harvard University Press.

Revers, M., & Traunmüller, R. (2020). Is free speech in danger on university campus? Some preliminary evidence from a most likely case. *KZfSS Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, 72(3), 471-497.

Williams, R. M. Jr (1968). The Concept of Norms, in: D. L. Sills (Ed.). *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, Volume 11. New York: Macmillan, pp. 204-208.