



Social norm change: psychological theories and historical examples
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Introduction

Social norms are deeply ingrained and unwritten rules that govern human behavior and expectations within a specific society (Bicchieri 2011). They serve as a framework for social interactions, playing a fundamental role in fostering cooperation for survival. For example, social norms allowed for the enforcement of social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. It became socially acceptable to social distance and socially unacceptable to disregard social distancing, thus pressuring people to conform and follow this rule. Another example is the increasing participation in sustainable and eco-friendly alternatives. Wasting mass amounts of paper, using too much plastic, and gasoline-powered vehicles are now all seen in a negative light because social norms changed the collective view of the public (Andrighetto 2022).

An essential function of social norms is to maintain social order. Social norms repel people from choosing egoistic choices and in turn point them towards behaviors in favor of the general public (Biel 2007). By motivating actions like gossip and ostracization, social norms ensure that unrelated people look over individualistic choices and instead comply to the goals of general society (Andrighetto 2022). Social norms also address disruptions caused by deviant behavior. When individuals violate social norms without facing consequences, it can erode trust within the community and lead to a breakdown of social structures (Biel & Thoegersen 20). The punishment of deviators sends a message that certain behaviors are unacceptable, protecting the shared values and beliefs that bring individuals together and foster a sense of collectiveness.

An empirical example of this is how people react to moralistic punishments from gods they believe in. In order to measure the effects of this punishment, Purzycki and colleagues (2016) introduced the random allocation game, in which participants put coins in one of two cups based on the result of a fair die. Theoretically, because participants threw a fair die, the number of coins in the two cups should be equal on average. However, the participants are asked to choose the cup mentally, which allows them to overrule the die in favor of one cup over another. In the self game, participants chose between a cup for themselves and the other cup for a stranger that shared the same religion as them (distant co-religionist). For the local co-religionist game, they had one cup for a co-religionist from their community, and the other for a co-religionist that did not interact in their local community. In both experimental games, the amount of coins participants allocated to the distant co-religionists increased as the participants' awareness of their own moralistic gods' punishment increased. Another study by House and colleagues (2020) found that children of ages between 9 and 11 are more likely to punish those with selfish motives rather than prosocial ones. They also found that the likelihood of punishing selfish third parties increased after going through middle childhood, where children undergo more experiences and become more prosocial, because they start conforming to norms more. Through this process, social norms serve as a tool for reinforcing positive behaviors and discouraging harmful ones, contributing to the overall stability of society (Purzycki et al. 2016).

Theories on how social norms change

Social norms are not fixed entities; they change and evolve over time in response to cultural shifts and changing beliefs (Andrighetto 2022). A prominent example of this evolution can be observed in people's attitudes towards gender equality. Over time, as feminist movements fought for women's suffrage and basic legal rights, the feminist wave gained momentum and led to significant advancements in women's rights. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many societies denied women the right to vote, but the success of the suffrage movement led to a change in social norms in which the general public started to change their view on women's roles in society as it directly challenged the preexisting belief that women were incapable of participating in politics and in turn demonstrated that women could contribute to society outside of the domestic sphere. Legislation such as the United States' 19th Amendment in 1920 boosted the impact of this changed social norm.

In addition to legislative changes, the representation of women in the media has also undergone substantial transformation. Historically, media portrayals perpetuated stereotypes and preconceptions that limited the roles of women. However, with the passage of time, societal awareness has increased, and media representations have become more diverse and empowering. In the 1940s during World War II, women were increasingly depicted as strong and capable workers as media campaigns urged women into the workforce because all the men had gone to war. The 21st century exhibited a boost in representation of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields in media which represents the emergence of women in traditionally male-dominated disciplines. As societal awareness of gender equality and representation has grown, media has played a vital role in challenging harmful norms and shaping more progressive narratives about women's roles.

Tipping points and trend setting

Mechanisms and processes through which social norms evolve over time, as exemplified in the case of people's attitudes toward gender equality, are offered by various theories that explain changes in social conventions (Centola 2015). One critical concept in understanding the dynamics of norm evolution is the idea of a "tipping point." This tipping point occurs when a significant portion of the population begins to deviate from established social norms, leading to a shift in the norm itself (Andreoni 2020). At the center of this process are small groups of people with normative beliefs who continuously push for deviance from the prevailing norms. These individuals, also referred to as trendsetters (Bicchieri 2018), challenge the empirical expectations of others, gradually influencing more and more people to start deviating. As an example, the women's rights movement started off by trendsetters like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott who organized the very first women's rights convention. Here, they created the Declaration of Sentiments which called for not only voting rights for women but also more professional opportunities. This convention marked the start of women's rights becoming a central topic of debate in the political realm of America. Driven by the persistence and efforts of these small groups a new social norms starts to emerge, ultimately pushing a large portion of the population to start deviating from the norm. As these small changes accumulate, a greater following is eventually reached, and the tipping point is achieved. Once this tipping point is reached, the deviation becomes the new norm, pulling even opposers to follow it.

The concept and mechanism of a tipping point have been investigated in experiments with a computational approach as well. In one experiment, participants encountered a social dilemma scenario demanding a choice between two options, Blue or Green, as a means of accumulating points through coordinated decision-making. Through this experiment, they found that putting tipping thresholds too high, about 40%, would result in a failed attempt to change a social norm. However, reducing the threshold to about 23% increased the likelihood of a change in social norms. They also found that the reducing of this threshold could mostly only be done through policy change which would in turn change the benefit to cost ratio of different options. Without policy intervention, societies can fail to abandon even very inefficient social norms because the tipping threshold cannot be reached (Andreoni 2020).

Tightness and looseness

Ideas for how social norms change may also be understood from the psychological literature on culture and cultural values. Culture, the term used to describe patterns of attitudes and behavior at a broader scale, is tightly related to social norms, as social norms are simply what are considered normal and typical within a cultural group. Thus, theories about variations and changes in culture help us better understand the processes by which social norms change. One theory suggests that norms evolve according to their ecological environment and either become more tight, as in having stricter social norms, or become loose, as in having more casual social norms (Gelfand 2017). Furthermore, this theory correlates tight societies with external threats which cause them to have explicit and rigid regulations governing various aspects of life, such as behavior, dress codes, and social interactions. These societies prioritize conformity and social order to maintain stability and address potential threats. An example of this would be ancient Egypt where strict norms were put into place, mainly on religion (Gelfand 2017).

On the other hand, loose societies, who face less threat, have more relaxed and adaptable norms, allowing for a wider range of individual behaviors and expressions. These societies prioritize individual freedom and creativity, leading to a greater diversity of lifestyles and attitudes (Gelfand 2017). An example would be ancient Persia where foreign cultures were adopted fairly easily. According to Herodotus, an ancient Greek historian, they would wear Egyptian breastplates at war and claim foreign customs as superior compared to their own (Herodotus, 1998, 1.135).

According to Jackson (2019), culture in the United States has grown progressively loose with free speech and class mobility being increasingly more lenient when compared to the past. With this looser culture came more creativity, with garments such as unisex clothing which emerged in the 1960s and novel ways of media coverage in huge issues like the Watergate Scandal or the Vietnam War. This study then went on to check the frequency of tight words in books, which included words like “restrain”, “prevent”, and “comply, and the frequency of loose words in books, which included words like “allow”, “freedom”, and “variability”. They found that there was an overall decrease in the amount of tight words used and an overall increase in the amount of loose words used. These trends suggest that their assumption about the United States becoming increasingly loose is true, and evidence like the decreasing execution rate, also support this claim (Jackson 2019).

This pattern was also exhibited across states in the United States, with greater tightness positively correlated with facing more significant ecological and historical threats (Jackson 2019). Additionally, when compared to looser states, tighter states had a history of elevated death rates due to natural disasters and increased disease prevalence. They also signified their heightened sense of ambient threat by exhibiting higher rates of military recruitment and allocating more resources to state defense (Gelfand 2017). These threats included natural disasters, food insecurity, and higher disease prevalence.

Individualism and collectivism

Another theory explains cultural variation on a scale of individualism and collectivism in a society. Individualistic cultures prioritize the needs and goals of the individual over group interests. They emphasize personal freedom and the pursuit of individual achievements. An example of an individualistic culture is the United States, where individual uniqueness is celebrated, and people are encouraged to assert their independence and make independent decisions. In contrast, collectivistic cultures place greater emphasis on the needs of the community and prioritize interdependence and cooperation. In collectivist societies, conformity is highly valued, and individuals often prioritize the interests of the group over personal desires (Gelfand 2017). South Korea is an example of a collectivistic culture, where strict and narrow expectations for areas such as careers, academics, and physical appearance contribute to maintaining social harmony.

What is important in our analysis of the literature is how a society changes along the continuum between individualism and collectivism. Several theories have been proposed. First, the pathogen prevalence theory proposes that regions exposed to prevalent diseases will interact less with strangers and instead collectivize with their community. This occurs through certain innate behaviors in humans that are related to their immune systems which make efforts to reduce the spread of pathogens. An example of this would be minimizing contact and increased xenophobia when exposed to infection-related threats (Faulkner, 2004). This theory also relates with collectivism as the hypothesis also proposes that fundamental aspects of collectivism, including clear distinctions between in-groups and out-groups, are link to behaviors that serve to counteract pathogens (Fincher, 2008). In one study performed in South Korea during the COVID-19 pandemic, the level of collectivistic thinking increased with the number of cases (Na, 2021).

Second, the subsistence theory posits that cultural values and norms are shaped by the ecological demands of specific subsistence practices. Different modes of subsistence, such as hunting and gathering, agriculture, or industrialization, can influence the social organization and values of a community. An extension of the subsistence theory is the rice theory, which proposes that farming rice in certain regions promotes interdependence, while farming wheat in other regions fosters independence (Talhem 2014). A study found that students from the southern part of China, where rice farming is prevalent, exhibited greater interdependence and holistic thinking compared to students from the wheat-growing north (Talhem 2014). Another related study found that in a Starbucks cafe, people from rice regions were less likely to be

alone when compared to people from the wheat region, with about 10% more people alone in the wheat region than the rice region on weekdays (Talhem 2014).

Levels of changes in social norms

Numerous theories of social and cultural norms have been introduced by psychological research, but many still remain separated from each other with little interconnectedness. To address this issue, we propose an approach to connect various theories in the context of norm changes. We will do so by looking at two levels at which social norms change over time: a micro level change and a macro level change. The former is referred to changes in social conventions that occur in a relatively short period of time, and the latter is referred to changes occurring at a slower rate as in shifts in culture. An important aspect of this definition is the awareness of individuals during the two different levels of changes. While individuals may readily perceive shifts in micro changes in norms, macro changes in norms evolve at a more gradual pace, leading to communal shifts in behavior that individuals may not immediately recognize.

Historical case study: the Russian Revolution

The implementation of the connection of these theories and how they affect the different levels of social norms can be illustrated through a historical event which induced numerous social norm changes: the Russian Revolution. By examining it, we can exemplify how these different theories come into play in changing macro and micro norms.

After the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II, Russia was put into a period of political unrest because of the empty seat of power. This emptiness also allowed for the suppressed thoughts of the public to pour out as the oppressive authoritative figure was gone. Many different political parties and identities tried to claim the spot as theirs by appealing to the general public, attempting to gain their trust to gain more power for overtaking the government. The government ultimately came into the hands of the communist Bolsheviks, with Lenin as their leader. This political transition from absolute monarchy to communism brought upon numerous changes, including changes in social norms on multiple levels.

Micro social norm changes during the revolution

Russian society during the late Tsarist era and early Russian revolution period induced numerous changes in human behavior of Russian society. The ideology of a tipping point and trendsetter can explain these changes and understand how the people of Russian society began to recognize their political power and social classes.



During the late Tsarist era in Russia, there was a noticeable increase in political awareness and involvement among the people, leading to significant changes in society. The government started to prompt higher education, leading to people gaining more knowledge about the world around them and specifically politics. This newly educated population, called the intelligentsia, started to question the absolute authority the Tsar had, taking on the role as a trendsetter. They then proceeded to influence the peasant and working class to join their cause and rebel against the Tsar. After a large enough portion of the working class joined the intelligentsia, they reached the tipping point which changed the norm from the working class not being able to voice their opinions to them being able to actively be part of politics. This rebellion ultimately ended up in the assassination of Emperor Alexander II.

The constant push of war by the Tsar resulted in the people becoming increasingly aware of the political state of their country. With growing political awareness, people began to better understand their social positions and started challenging the existing power structures in the country. This increased awareness formed Russia's first major liberal political group, the Union of Liberation. Taking on the trendsetter role, they inspired other workers and peasants to join their rebellion until a tipping point was reached and the norm of an autocratic government in Russia was changed.

They first asked for a constitution that would help transform this norm by persuading local councils established by Tsar Alexander II. They then supported the creation of other unions made up of the working class, who would join them in the Bloody Sunday massacre. More and more people in the working class started to join this rebellion until the tipping point was reached and Tsar Nicholas II issued the October Manifesto, stating that a legislative parliament would be established.

The introduction of this manifesto also promised the Russian public freedom of speech, press, and assembly, allowing them to be more expressive of themselves compared to the absolute monarchy they had been experiencing up to this point. This also shows how legislation can help boost a social deviance into reaching its tipping point and ultimately become a social norm. This framework closely resembles how contemporary psychological theories explain changes in social norms.

However, when the Russian government formally established the manifesto by establishing the Fundamental Laws in place of a constitution, they limited the amount of freedom promised to the people, prompting the start of the Russian Revolution which played a key role in accelerating social norm changes, pushing for a shift towards equality and unity in culture. On a smaller scale, the abdication of Nicholas II marked the end of the Romanov dynasty's rule and opened the door for a new political landscape. This event sparked widespread protests and strikes that fueled the revolution, leading people to question traditional social norms set by the former rulers. The long-accepted idea of passing down power through generations within the Romanov family was now met with uncertainty. The once powerful Tsar, who symbolized autocratic authority, stepped down, creating a sense of doubt and allowing different political ideas to gain traction. Sensing external threat, the working class of Russia, which made up of about 80% of the population, started to collectivize and ask for change (McCauley et. al, 2024).

Macro social norm changes during the revolution

In addition to the rapid changes in the society and thus social norms, larger cultural shifts started to occur due to the accumulation of these historical changes. The Bolsheviks introduced extensive labor reforms aimed at completely transforming the capitalist system. These reforms included actions like taking over industries and giving workers more control over production. However, these changes in workers' rights were met with mixed reactions and varying degrees of acceptance. While some reforms were put in place, the political situation remained uncertain, leaving the future of labor rights up in the air.

On a larger scale, the transition from an agrarian society to a more industrialized and centralized one introduced changes that the majority of the Russian population was not aware of. The subsistence theory mentioned earlier can help to explain this. As the Bolsheviks came to power and implemented policies aimed at transforming the capitalist system, including taking control of industries and resources, the economic landscape shifted significantly. This economic transformation had an impact on the social fabric of Russia. The New Economic Policy (NEP) allowed for limited private ownership and entrepreneurial activities. While the intention behind these economic policies may not have been to promote individualism, they inadvertently led to looser norms, as people began to focus on their individual economic pursuits within the confines of the new economic system. They were able to freely trade, rather than only serve the government under tight rules like in the past (McCauley et. al, 2024).

Conclusion

In summary, the current investigation into social norms and how they change has shed light on how human behavior and culture evolve over time. We've learned that social norms are like unwritten rules that guide how we interact with each other, and these norms can shift due to historical events, social movements, and changes in what society values. The Russian Revolution serves as a clear example of how multiple levels of changes in social norms can happen during times of major upheaval, reshaping how people behave and how culture evolves. The Russian Revolution demonstrates how outside threats, government decisions, and economic factors can affect whether a society becomes tighter or looser, often in surprising ways.

In conclusion, this exploration highlights the importance of grasping social norms and how they transform because they have a significant impact on societies and individuals. In our fast-changing world, understanding the role of social norms in shaping our behavior, values, and culture is vital for driving positive changes and progress.

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