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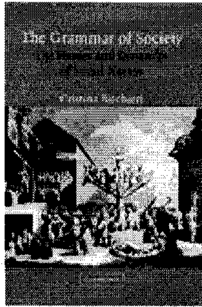
Why Reasonable People Respect Social Norms—Most of the Time

A review of



The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms
by Cristina Bicchieri

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Reviewed by
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Social norms come in a variety of flavors. Some tell us what to do (e.g., take revenge when wronged, reciprocate a favor, or help the needy), whereas others tell us what not to do (e.g., abuse trust, lie to get ahead, or sleep with the enemy). Social norms regulate behavior. They make it homogeneous within a group and highlight differences between groups. They curb self-interest and thus help solve Hobbes's problem of *homo homini lupus*.

The concept of social norms is familiar in everyday thinking and communication. Agents of socialization inculcate norms in the young, usually assuming that it is in their charges' long-term interest to follow them. It is perhaps surprisingly, that not all social sciences have availed themselves of this important construct. Experimental psychology is traditionally wary of folk concepts. In this tradition, norms are either ignored or actively dismissed as mere rationalizations that laypeople use to explain

their own behavior. On this view, the true causes of behavior are intrapsychic processes, be they of the cognitive-perceptual or the affective-motivational variety. Traditional economics adopts a similar perspective, assuming that individuals are only self-interested. Self-interest is satisfied when utilities are maximized, a feat that people can perform by knowing what they want and being able to multiply. Of the social sciences, sociology has the most respect for norms. In this field, norms are often treated as properties of a social system and thus as irreducible to individual psychology.

In *The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms*, Cristina Bicchieri presents a new interpretation of social norms that will offend psychologists, economists, and sociologist alike... and therein lies its value. To sociologists, her theory will be too reductionistic, whereas to psychologists, it will not be reductionistic enough. Economists will complain that a nonconsequentialist theory cannot be rational. Bicchieri herself is a noted philosopher and game theorist. Her interdisciplinary approach may just be what is needed to rescue social norms from the narrowness of paradigm-dependent interpretations and the fuzziness of folk theory.

A Psychological Process Model of Normative Behavior

Bicchieri makes three assumptions. First, social norms are context dependent. To justify this assumption, Bicchieri draws on important work by Cialdini, Kallgren, and Reno (1990) which shows that norms can be activated or suspended by "trigger cues." Most of us know how to behave at a formal dinner. Here, the white tablecloth or the bottle of vintage Sauvignon may be the only triggers needed to keep us from emitting impolite sounds. When enjoying breakfast in bed, however, some of

us might exercise less self-constraint. The longer a society lives with certain norms, the more their arbitrary origins are forgotten. As Bicchieri notes, people commit the naturalistic fallacy when they ascribe intrinsic value to long-standing norms. The arbitrariness of some norms is more apparent to the outsider who unwittingly violates them. As a youth, I traveled from my home in northern Germany to southern Germany. In Munich, I sought to sample the legendary white sausage, the edible symbol of Bavarian identity. What I did not know was that there exists a rule that forbids the enjoyment of the national sausage either before or after 2:00 p.m. (I forget which). An unsuspecting Prussian youth, I ordered the sausage on the wrong side of the temporal divide and faced the wrath of the Wagnerian waitress.

Second, most humans have conditional preferences to conform to social norms. The demanded behavior is not necessarily attractive in its own right, but if there is a norm, then we will do it. This makes sense in light of the third assumption, which is that an individual must have at least one of the following beliefs: the empirical belief that most people enact the mandated behavior (and hence we too conform) or the normative belief that if he or she does not behave as mandated, then others might disapprove and even exact a punishment. The power of the last type of belief is an explicit ingredient of Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior (not cited by Bicchieri).[1] To conclude the tale of the white sausage, it should be noted that these beliefs swiftly took possession of me. On my next trip to Munich, I will be motivated to order the storied meat at the right time of day (if I could only remember which it is).

Together, these three assumptions establish the model's methodological individualism. Methodological individualism is the controversial (i.e., disparaged by

sociologists and neocollectivist social psychologists) view that social phenomena can be reduced to processes operating in individual minds (Krueger, Acevedo, & Robbins, 2005). Emergent properties may appear at the level of the group or even larger social systems, but they are not the product of design or desire.

As an exemplar of methodological individualism, the model needs to specify processes by which people come to follow norms. What Bicchieri describes looks like a conventional stimulus → intervening mental operation → response scheme. At the level of the stimulus, there are contextual cues that signal the applicability of the norm. At the level of intervening processes, there are a variety of cognitive operations (assessments of similarity, familiarity, prototypicality, etc.) that guide the interpretation and categorization of the stimulus event. Finally, at the level of the response, there is the activation of relevant beliefs (about what others will do and how they will respond to the self), preferences, and ultimately the behavior itself.

Many of the concepts at the intervening stage are familiar to psychologists. Spreading activation, priming, as well as script and schema activation all matter. What is less clear is the automaticity of these processes. Bicchieri seems undecided on the issue. On the one hand, she wishes to "emphasize [the norm's] automatic component" (p. 4) and to claim that it is wrong to believe that "people consciously deliberate about norms, that they mentally refer to them before acting" (p. 80). Automaticity is compelling when we consider the myriad of verbal, and particularly nonverbal, gestures we exchange efficiently and unthinkingly within a culture. The restaurant script, for example, can be executed in a dream-like state, allowing the conscious mind to focus itself on the company, the conversation, and the delicacies on the table. On the other hand, not all social norms

are overlearned, and Bicchieri is also concerned with the emergence of new norms. When norm-consistent behavior is not yet routinized, conscious awareness and referral to the norm still play a role. Drawing on the concept of "pluralistic ignorance," Bicchieri highlights the ability of her model to explain how unpopular and inefficient norms can persist. Individual gang members may privately abhor violence but may go along with the group because they believe that the violent behavior of other gang members is an expression of their true preferences. When people conform with unpopular norms, they are, by definition, aware of the contradiction between their true preferences and the preferences they reveal to others. Norm adherence can hardly be automatic in such a context.

The Trouble With Social Preference Models

Whereas the contextualism of Bicchieri's model will appeal to psychologists, it will trouble economists. From the traditional economic emphasis on self-interest, there have emerged amended models that take into account "social preferences" (e.g., Fehr & Schmidt, 1999). These models assume that most people not only are self-interested but also care about the welfare of others (i.e., are benevolent) or fairness (i.e., are inequality averse). Social preference models continue to assume, however, that people only care about the final outcomes (and their utilities), and not the processes that produce them. In other words, even social utility models are strictly consequentialist. Moreover, these models assume that social preferences are stable properties of the people who have them. This is a rather astonishing assumption given the massive evidence for the situational variability of behavior. Jones and Rachlin (2006) recently showed that benevolence declines hyperbolically with the social distance of the other. Bicchieri makes the point of contextual

variation in Chapter 3, where she reviews six studies that are rapidly becoming modern classics. One way or another, these studies show how subtle changes in the framing of bargaining games, such as the ultimatum game, alter the players' strategies. Social preference models cannot explain these variations. Bicchieri argues that (most of) the observed changes can be attributed to the mental deactivation of norms of fairness. These studies, and the fact that Bicchieri's model can explain their results, are a serious strike against the economists' dearly held notion of revealed preferences, according to which people's personal desires can be directly inferred from their behavior. When people honor norms, however, their behaviors merely reflect social desirability.

It is somewhat surprising that Bicchieri casts her own model in terms of a utility function and that she presents the standard economic math to prove it. One wonders if this makes her model as consequentialist as the models she critiques. Just how different are these models? To find out, I simulated the prisoner's dilemma using the social preference model most familiar to social psychologists, namely van Lange's (1999) integrative model of social value orientation. According to this model, self-interest, benevolence, and fairness (i.e., own payoff minus other's payoff) have variable weights, ranging from 0 to 1. The utility of an outcome is the weighted sum of these preferences, namely $U = w_1 \times \text{self} + w_2 \times \text{other} - w_3 \times |\text{self} - \text{other}|$. For simplicity, I let $w_1 = 1$. Simulation 1 varied w_2 while $w_3 = 0$; Simulation 2 varied w_3 while $w_2 = 0$; and Simulation 3 varied w_2 and w_3 while $w_2 = w_3$.

In descending order, the payoffs in the prisoner's dilemma are T (Temptation, or unilateral defection), R (Reward, or mutual cooperation), P (Punishment, or mutual defection), and S (Sucker, or unilateral

cooperation). The objective payoffs represent the utilities of a narrowly self-interested player (i.e., $w_1 = 1$, $w_2 = w_3 = 0$). In the simulations, integer numbers ranging from 0 to 3 represented the objective payoffs. According to Bicchieri, a benevolent player's utilities are ordered R > P > S > T. This ordering did not emerge in Simulation 1, which varied only the benevolence weight. It did, however, emerge in Simulation 3, which varied both benevolence and fairness, but only when these preferences were stronger than self-interest (i.e., for $w > 1$). The altruist, according to Bicchieri, ranks the payoffs as S > R > P > T. No wonder such people are rare. They enjoy being suckered more than anything else. Their preferences emerge only when the weight for benevolence is varied, and only when that weight is exceedingly large (i.e., when $w_2 > 2$). Finally, the most interesting finding was that a norm-following player orders the payoffs as R > P > T > S. This ordering emerges for $w_3 = 23$, when $w_2 = 0$ (Simulation 1), or when $w_2 = w_3 > .5$ (Simulation 3). In short, when social preferences are assumed to transform objective payoffs into subjective utilities, Bicchieri's norm follower can be recovered much like any other type.

Payoff transformations do not solve the prisoner's dilemma in the sense that cooperation does not emerge as the dominating strategy. At best, they turn the dilemma into a coordination game. The norm follower prefers mutual cooperation over mutual defection over unilateral defection over unilateral cooperation. The question is how a norm follower proposes to realize the reward payoff. According to Bicchieri, a norm follower prefers R, expects others to cooperate (thus enabling R), and conditionally cooperates him- or herself. What the model does not treat well is the question of sequence, which is of considerable psychological significance. One

possibility is that people somehow come to expect that others will cooperate. They then decide to cooperate themselves, thereby expressing conformity. This works well when information about others is available (e.g., after repeated play), but it cannot explain cooperation in a one-shot game.

There are theoretical alternatives that can explain cooperation in a one-shot game. According to the theory of "evidential reasoning," people can project their own strategies onto others and can thereby realize that others are ultimately likely to do what they themselves do. Because they prefer R over P, they cooperate. Initial cooperation can thus emerge from self-interest without any transformation of payoffs. Over repeated rounds, evidential reasoning can contribute to the emergence of norms of cooperation (Krueger & Acevedo, 2005). Because social projection works against pluralistic ignorance, inefficient or unpopular norms are unlikely to develop (Krueger, 2002).

The "theory of moves" (Brams, 1993) can also explain how people solve coordination problems, although this account is less parsimonious than the evidential reasoning account. One needs to assume that (a) a player's utility ordering is norm following (i.e., R > P > T > S) and that (b) the player expects others to have the same utility ordering (i.e., an element of projection is still needed). Then the player can cooperate, expecting that the other player's best move is to reciprocate, and knowing that the other player knows that he or she (Player 1) seeks to maximize his or her own utility.

Conclusion

To psychologists, Bicchieri's book should be interesting because it offers a rational reconstruction of social norms. Her process-oriented approach will hopefully contribute to a

reevaluation of classic social-psychological findings such as conformity with peer behavior, obedience to authority, and reluctance to help others in need. Bicchieri's analysis suggests that none of these phenomena necessarily reflect individual irrationality, but rather the interplay of reasonable beliefs and defensible preferences.

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[1]According to Ajzen (1991), the activation of a social norm is not enough to create a behavioral attention. The person must also hold private attitude that is consistent with the norm and believe that he or she is able to produce the desired behavior.

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