



Norm conformity across societies[☆]



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ABSTRACT

This paper studies the aggregate distribution of declared opinions and behavior when heterogeneous individuals make the trade-off between being true to their private opinions and conforming to a social norm. The model sheds light on how various sanctioning regimes induce conformity and by whom, and on phenomena such as societal polarization and unimodal concentration. In strict societies, individuals will tend to either fully conform to the social norm or totally ignore it, while individuals in liberal societies will tend to compromise between these two extremes. Furthermore, the degree of strictness determines whether those who nearly agree with the norm or those who strongly disagree with it will conform. The degree of liberalism similarly determines which individuals will compromise the most. A number of empirical predictions, and several methods of how to test them, are suggested.

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1. Introduction

It is by now well established that social norms, and social pressure to conform to these norms, influence individual decision making in a wide spectrum of situations. In particular, imagine a controversial social or political issue where there exists a social norm, that is, a consensual opinion or norm of behavior. Suppose now that each individual in society has some private opinion regarding this issue, and each needs to publicly declare her stance. An individual whose private opinion differs from the social norm will need to consider the trade-off between the social pressure of violating the norm and the psychological cost of stating an opinion different to her private view. In many cases, such as at what age to bear children, how much alcohol to drink and to what extent to

follow religious customs, the individual can choose the extent of conformity to the norm from a continuum. We analyze this basic trade-off in a heterogeneous agent framework and present the aggregate outcomes across societies.

In particular, we examine the *extent* of conformity that one person exhibits compared to that exhibited by another person with a different private opinion. This analysis provides predictions for (i) which individuals in society will conform more, (ii) which individuals in society will make larger individual concessions, (iii) the distribution of stated opinions in society and (iv) which norms will be sustainable. We show that although the problem faced by each individual is fairly simple, the outcomes at the aggregate level are diverse, and we analyze how these outcomes depend on the underlying characteristics of society.

In practice, societies differ not only in the general weight of social pressure, but also in its curvature. That is, they differ in the way they sanction small deviations from the norm compared to large ones. We show that the curvature of social pressure has more intricate and possibly more important effects than the general weight of pressure. Moreover, in order to connect the model's results to outcomes across societies, and drawing on observations of sanctioning in different societies and cultures (to be presented in the next section), we apply labels to the curvature of social pressure: *strict* societies are those emphasizing full adherence to the social norm, and hence they utilize concave social

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pressure; *liberal* societies are those allowing freedom of expression as long as it is not too extreme, and hence they utilize convex social pressure. Strictly speaking, these labels are not necessary for the formal analysis, but they prove useful, as they highlight the consistency between the results of the model and observations of actual societies.

We find that in liberal societies, the convexity of social pressure facilitates a compromise mentality, where most individuals are compelled to adjust at least a little bit to the norm. Furthermore, the degree of liberalism (i.e., the degree of convexity) plays an important role. Very liberal societies will tend mainly to make those who privately detest the norm adjust to it. This will create a society that looks polarized. Less liberal societies will be more directed at getting moderates to conform and hence will look cohesive, with a concentration of stances around the norm.

Strictness, on the other hand, facilitates an all-or-nothing mentality, since only full conformity counts. This may indeed lead to full conformity, but may also backfire so that some individuals do not concede at all. Moreover, the degree of strictness (i.e., the degree of concavity) is important in predicting who follows the norm. In very strict societies, the full conformers are those who nearly agree with the norm anyway, while those who strongly reject the norm privately, express their dissent publicly as well. However, in less strict societies, paradoxically those who dislike the norm the most are the only ones upholding it, while those who basically agree with the norm privately, criticize it mildly in public. This creates a surprising result: an inversion of opinions.

We also find that, in some cases, opposition to the norm will be more extreme in strict societies than in liberal ones. This result is surprising as it emerges even when sanctions are harsher in strict societies. It is driven by the all-or-nothing behavior of individuals in strict societies, compared to the compromising behavior of individuals in liberal ones. This result is formalized into a testable prediction and we suggest some methods and situations of social interaction in which this and a few other predictions can be tested.

Another outcome that clearly separates liberal and strict societies relates to the possible location of the norm. Letting the norm be the average *declared* opinion in society, we show that norms in liberal societies are bound to be representative also of the *private* sentiments in society, as the norm coincides with the average private opinion. In contrast, strict societies may well maintain a biased social norm, centered on a point that is far from the average private opinion. This implies that strict societies allow for multiple equilibria, while liberal societies do not. One interpretation of this result is that strictness is a tool for maintaining biased norms.

The contribution of our paper lies in explaining different patterns of norm conformity across societies. This requires modeling continuous choice under various sanctioning regimes. Previous theoretical papers with a similar individual trade-off usually model binary decisions (e.g., Bénabou and Tirole, 2011; Brock and Durlauf, 2001; Lindbeck et al., 2003; Lopez-Pintado and Watts, 2008; Akerlof, 1980; and Kuran, 1995). Models of continuous decisions usually assume quadratic utility functions (Kuran and Sandholm, 2008 and Manski and Mayshar, 2003), thus limiting their ability to analyze how the sanctioning regime affects conformity. Another type of model (see Bernheim, 1994 and Bénabou and Tirole, 2006) assumes an exogenous norm in a signaling game. There individuals are punished or rewarded for their *private* preferences, instead of their declarations or actions as in our model. Finally, our paper is related to the works of Eguia (2013) and Clark and Oswald (1998), who, although analyzing different issues than we do, do concentrate on how the curvature of preferences affects individual behavior.¹

The next section motivates our labels by considering observations of sanctioning across societies. The model is outlined in Section 3. Section 4

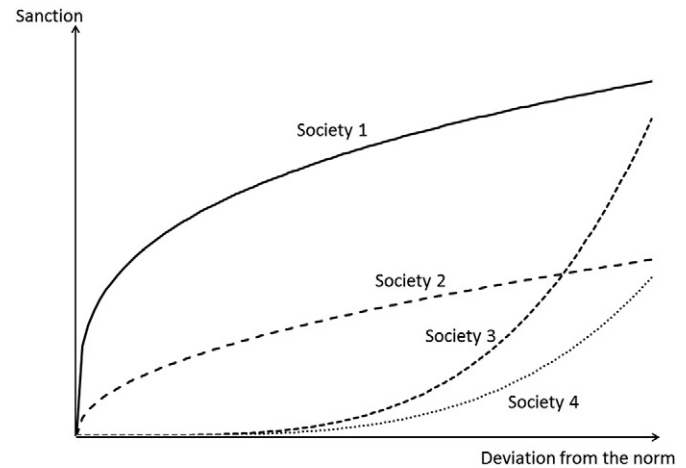


Fig. 1. Sanctioning across societies. A system of sanctioning may be at the same time harsh and concave (society 1). Alternatively, it may be light and concave (society 2). Or, it may be harsh and convex (society 3). Finally, like in society 4, it may be light and convex.

presents the main differences between liberal and strict societies and Section 5 and 6 analyze liberal and strict societies respectively in more detail. Section 7 presents a number of testable model implications and suggests some methods and data sources for carrying out these tests. Section 8 concludes. Proofs are covered in Appendix A.

2. Social pressure across societies

In this section we demonstrate that an important distinction between societies concerns the relative strength of sanctions they impose on small versus large deviations from the norm. One example comes from experiments using public goods games with punishment (Herrmann et al., 2008). In these games participants punish others who contribute a different amount to a public good than they themselves do. The experimental results suggest that deviations are punished convexly in places such as Copenhagen, Bonn and Melbourne, while they are punished concavely in places such as Riyadh and Muscat. Another detail to note in the results is that for large deviations, heavier punishments were used in Melbourne compared to those used in either Riyadh or Muscat, while for small deviations the opposite applies. This pattern matches that of the stylized societies 2 (representing Muscat and Riyadh) and 3 (representing Melbourne) in Fig. 1.

A more anecdotal demonstration of these points emerges from a crude comparison of the sanctioning systems in the Israeli Jewish Ultraorthodox community, or under the Taliban, with those of liberal West European institutions.² An important difference between the Taliban and the Ultraorthodox sanctioning systems is that the Taliban use substantially heavier sanctions for any comparable deviation from the norm. But one characteristic they have in common is that they require strict adherence to their code of conduct, sanctioning any small deviation harshly, while large deviations are sanctioned only slightly more.³ Hence, they respectively match stylized societies 1 and 2 in Fig. 1.

What about the sanctioning structure of liberal West European institutions? Almost by definition, and as is manifested in their constitutions, liberal democracies allow citizens a broad freedom of expression and political parties a wide range of positions. But once a party or an individual expresses views very far from the consensus, the sanction is

² This is to some extent a comparison of informal and formal sanctioning, but the purpose here is to highlight that sanctioning systems vary in curvature.

³ There are numerous accounts of the Taliban using capital punishment for both misdemeanor and larger offenses. In Israeli Ultraorthodox society, a woman may be censured for wearing a dress that is too short, and a man for publicly supporting the drafting of members of the Ultraorthodox community into the Israeli army.

¹ In a subsequent paper, Michaeli and Spiro (2014), we study the conditions for the very existence of an endogenous social norm when all individuals put pressure on each other.

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