



Munich Personal RePEc Archive

Why do People Punish the Rule Breakers?: The Sustainability of Social Norms

Singh, Indervir

Centre for Development Studies, Prasanth Nagar, Ulloor,
Trivandrum, Kerala, India

2010

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/21691/>
MPRA Paper No. 21691, posted 29 Mar 2010 07:15 UTC

Why do People Punish the Rule Breakers?: The Sustainability of Social Norms

Indervir Singh
Centre for Development Studies
Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala
email: indervirs@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper attempts to provide reasons for sustainability of social norms by considering internalization as the basic motivation behind the punishment behavior. A society requires people to implant the social norms in others, and punishing the rule breaker provides a person utility by letting him feel good through fulfilling his responsibility. The responsibility increases with closeness of relationship, therefore relatives and friends tend to punish the rule breaker harder. The breaking of a norm also acts as a 'bad name' for rule breaker's relatives and friends, which, further, prompts them to punish him. Since, punishing the rule breaker also benefits non-punishers, some people may start selling the punishment activity, if the benefited people, due to their internalization of the norm, pay punishers in the form of money, support etc.

Key words: social norms, internalization, bad name, power asymmetry.
JEL classification: D02, D03, Z13.

1 Introduction

In spite of largely understood fact that social norms have an impact on decisions of the people, the question that remains unanswered is: how do social norms sustain? In other words, the enforcement mechanism of the

social norms is not clear. However, a few attempts have been made to shed some light on this issue.

The most common explanation provided for the sustainability is that people follow the norms due to the fear of the punishment from others (see Akerlof, 1980 and Basu, 2000). Each person, who punishes the rule breaker (here the word rule has the same meaning as the word norm and will be used interchangeably), does so because he expects a punishment from others in case he fails to punish the rule breaker. Extending the same argument, a person punish those, who fail to punish rule breaker, since he also expects punishment in case he could not do so, and this will go on like this. In other words, due to the fear of punishment from each other, people are trapped in an equilibrium position which, depending on its impact, can be good or bad. This line of argument is criticized by many studies. For example, Elster (1989) pointed out that each punishment activity has a cost on the punisher, as he has to put time and efforts for this. Further, when one go far from the defector in the chain of an action, the expected cost imposed by others, for not punishing the rule breaker or punishing someone who has not punished the rule breaker, decreases. It increases the chance that the person will not punish those who do not punish the rule breaker, hence bring down the expected cost of not punishing. This happens due to the decrease in the expected cost of getting punished in comparison to the cost one has to bear to punish the rule breaker.

The role of emotions in individual decision-making provides another explanation for the sustainability of social norms. The advocates of this argument suggest that the sanctions, originated due to emotions, can sustain the punishment for a long time (see Elster, 1996 and 1998). Though, this line of argument indicates a way to explain the reason behind sustainability of the norms, it fails to provide any framework for it. Further, this argument does not provide any explanation for the free rider problem that exists in the emotionally motivated actions of a person due to social norms. For example, if punishing someone is a costly affair, why would someone scold or frown at a person for not behaving in a socially approved way when others can also do it?

In this context, this paper is an attempt to provide the reasons for the sustainability of the social norms. It considers internalization as the basic reason behind the punishment behavior. Internalization provides a punisher an extra incentive for punishing the rule breaker by giving the former a chance to feel good about himself. The feel good factor for punisher comes from the

fact that the society requires its members to transfer the social norms to next generation and ensure that they are followed by other members of the society. Hence, the punisher's reaction against the rule breaker gives him utility in the same sense as he gets by following a internalized norm. The responsibility is often higher on the relative and friends. As a result they have higher responsibility to discipline the rule breaker. Failing to punish rule breaker by a person gives others a signal that they also share those traits with rule breaker, hence they also have to face sanctions. Since, relatives and friends have higher responsibility, the sanctions for not punishing are also higher on them. This situation is often termed as 'bad name'. This provides the relatives and the friends higher incentive to punish the rule breaker. Furthermore, a person may use the punishment activity for other benefits such as monetary gains or attaining political power, if people who have internalized the norm pay him for his services to feel good by contributing to the activity. Thus, it is in the self interest of a person to punish the rule breaker.

The paper is structured as follows. After the introduction in section 1, the reasons for the sustainability of the social norms are discussed in section 2. And section 3 concludes the study.

2 Reasons for punishing the rule breakers

There is a broad consensus that the basic motivation for any reaction of persons/individuals against the rule breaker comes from the internalization of that norm. Internalization of a norm by a person means that he gets utility by following the norm (Elster, 1989, Basu, 2000). A person also gets utility if others follow that norm and loses utility when they do not. The utility lose is the cost imposed by the action of rule breaker on people who have internalized the norm. People can reduce this cost by punishing the rule breaker, as it will give them satisfaction. The reduction in the cost by punishing the rule breaker can be considered as the gain from punishment activity. In spite of the gains from punishing the rule breaker, this explanation is plagued by the free rider problem. This problem emerges when it is costly to punish someone and at the same time punishing the rule breaker brings down the cost for everyone who has internalized the norm. As a result, every norm follower would like another norm follower to undertake the task of punishment. In this way, one can save the cost of punishing and at the same time derive the utility from the fact that the rule breaker got punished.

Therefore, from the above elaboration it is evident that an individual will be motivated to discipline the rule breaker if and only if the punisher expects certain personal gains that exceed the costs of punishment.

Nelson and Greene (2003), while explaining the reasons behind the altruistic acts, provide a few important insights into the matter. They argue that altruism is important in kinship relations only, and plays little role in other cases. The study consider altruistic tendencies as the result of social norms, and a person follows these norms to signal others of their trustworthiness and have a good image of himself. A person behaves in accordance with the internalized norms to feel that he is a good person which is generally labeled as conscience. Thus, it is in the self-interest of the people to follow their conscience, as it gives them utility by letting them feel good about themselves. Though, their study is limited to the norms which create altruistic behavior, their argument can be used for other internalized norms too. For instance, suppose a situation in which person B is behaving in a way which is prohibited by the internalized norm of person A. A will feel happy if B gets punished for his activity, however the happiness will be more if he can punish B himself. By punishing B, A will get a chance to feel good about himself. In other words, A gets an additional reduction in cost by punishing B himself. Thus, a person may have an incentive to perform the punishment activity himself rather than depending on others to do it. This extra gain may arise due to the reason that people, in a society, are supposed to implant the social norms in the others, and take proper measure if anyone breaks the rules. This incentives is limited to those who have internalized the norm, because only they can feel that they have contributed to their society. Therefore, a person, who has internalized the norm, will have an extra gain from punishment activity, since he feels that he has performed his duty towards his society or community by punishing the rule breaker. Further, the responsibility is often not the same for every person, and increases with the closeness of the relation of a person with the rule breaker, that is, a close relative has higher responsibility to discipline the rule breaker than others. Since relatives and friends are in a better position to observe as well as control the activities of a person, putting higher responsibility on relatives by the society may be to minimize the cost of implanting the social norms and disciplining the rule breakers. This reason also provides a possible explanation for the commonly observed tendency of the relatives (especially family members) to bear high cost to punish the rule breaker. For instance, a person, who consider inter-religious marriage unacceptable, can impose severe punishment on his family

member who breaks that norm, even when he has migrated to a community which does not share that norm and there are least chance of getting any kind of punishment from the society for not punishing the rule breaker. This explanation predicts punishment activity even when a non-punishers also get benefited.

The above argument also provides an explanation for the punishment against the relatives and friends of rule breaker who have not punished him. As discussed earlier, the relatives and the friends have higher responsibility to punish the rule breaker. In case a relative or a friend does not punish the rule breaker, others get a signal that he has not internalized the norm and shares the same trait. This is because, people judge the character of a person from the character of people who are associated with him, such as, relatives, friends, and other people of his social or religious group. In a society, this tendency of the people becomes important to infer the internalization of a particular norm. A relative or a friend of the rule breaker is often considered to share the trait. It is just like the idiom that 'a person is known by the company he keeps'. Therefore, an association with a rule breaker leads to similar punishments as imposed on the rule breaker like criticism, comments and untrustworthiness. This situation is often termed as 'bad name'. The 'bad name' results in intensifying the reaction of the relatives and friends against the rule breaker. Their reaction is to signal other members of the society that they are no longer associated with the rule breaker and do not share any feeling or trait with him. Since a reaction generates the signal only for the person who has performed the reaction, it decreases the cost of bad name only for the person who has responded to the situation.

In fact, the concept of bad name finds enormous use in the societies attempt to justify the punishment meted out to the rule breaker. For example, Jafri (2008:2) discussed the case of honour killing of Samia Sarwar by her parents in Lahore, Pakistan. While discussing the view point of the supporters of the killing, he notes that The crime, in their [supporters] view, was committed by Samia; the parents merely committed an act of reordination of their universe; they were forced to address the dissonance created by the dishonourable act committed by their daughter. This statement clearly points towards the decrease in the cost of bad name for the people who performed the act of killing. The cost imposed by bad name on any person depends upon the value that a society assigns to the norm and the closeness of the relationship between a person and rule breaker. For example, breaking of the norms related to eating will most probably invite fewer comments or lesser

bad name than stealing, and the family has to bear the higher cost of bad name than the relatives. Similarly, a relative also may have to bear higher cost than a friend. However, the benefits of punishment need not limit to only those who internalization of social norms or association with the rule breaker. A common member of the society may have internalized the norm, nonetheless their cost of punishing the rule breaker may be much higher than their gains from it. In this situation, people may find it better either not to take up any punishment activity or just take up activities which are less costly, such as, criticizing the rule breaker (criticism may be less costly for punisher, but may impose high cost on the rule breaker owing to the large number of punishers). Still, there may be people who take up very costly actions against the rule breaker. This may be due to the higher internalization of the norm by punisher or his lower cost of taking up punishment activity. However in that case, non-punishers will grow at the cost of punishers (Milinski and Rockenbach, 2008). In this regard, Dreber et al. (2008), in their experiment, found that high punishment ensures high cooperation, but at the same time impose higher cost on a punisher. And non-punishers have higher payoffs than punishers. As a result, the punishment behavior may disappear in the long run if the punishers continuously tend to have lower payoff than non-punishers. The punishment behavior will continue to persist only if punisher's loss in the punishment activity allows him to gain in other activities.

Two reasons can be provided for higher gains by punishers. One possible explanation is that others (who have internalized the norm) may use punishers reaction as a signal of his trustworthiness, which, in turn, may help him to grow faster than others. Second benefit of punishing the rule breaker in spite of high costs involved is that people feel indebted to the punisher for adding to their utility by taking up punishment activity. It increases the utility directly of the punisher since he gets praised by others, as people like to be praised. Further, people due to the feeling of indebtedness would like to bear a certain cost for him, since this will help them to feel good about themselves. Moreover, people may also like to bear certain cost to support his act and save him from any legal complication, which will lower the cost of punishment activity. Though, the cost that each person is willing to bear for the punisher may not be very high, nonetheless the addition of the cost that all people are ready to bear may be high enough to provide high incentive for his work. These incentives may be in the form of monetary contribution by people, gain of political power etc. In this case, the punisher acts as

a firm, which produces and sells punishment activities to other people. In addition, punishing a large number of rule breakers gives the punisher an opportunity to devise different cost saving ways, such as less additional cost of legal cases, less additional cost of influencing authorities, less cost of taking action as he can employ people to perform different jobs and so on. As a result, a punisher, who provides punishment service to the people, enjoys scale economies.

Hence, it is in the self-interest of the people to punish the rule breaker. Nonetheless, a punisher has to take into account the cost as well as benefit of punishment activity, and decide about the optimal level of punishment activity. In other words, the punishment decision is influenced by both cost and benefits of it.

3 Conclusion

Despite the wide understanding of researchers about the impact of social norms on economic activities, the reasons for the sustainability of social norms are less known. The present study is an attempt to provide the reasons for the sustainability of social norms by explaining the incentives of a person to punish the rule breakers. The reasons for punishing the rule breaker can be explained by the fact that the society requires his people to implant social norms in other members. And a person punish the rule breaker to fulfill his responsibility, which gives the former a reason to feel good about himself. The relatives and the friends have higher responsibility to control the behavior of a person, hence their benefits from reaction is also higher than others.

Further, reaction against the rule breaker also acts as a signal that the person does not share any trait with the rule breaker, and not doing so leads to the sanctions. Since the responsibility of implanting a social norm in a person increases with closeness, the severity of sanctions also increases with it. This is often termed as 'bad name', and provides relatives and friends an additional incentive to punish the rule breaker. A punisher can also benefit by providing punishment services (punishing rule breaker for others satisfaction), if people who have internalized the social norms are ready to pay him to feel that by doing so they have contributed to the society. In this case, a punisher will also have incentive to invest in continuing the social norms as his income will depend on the incentives from his service to others.

The present paper is a modest attempt to explain the sustainability of

the social norms by pointing out the incentives for the punisher to take up punishment activity. The study can be further developed by working out the conditions for punishment activity.

References

- Akerlof, G. A., “A Theory of Social Custom, of Which Unemployment May be One Consequence,” *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 94 (1980), 749–775.
- Basu, K., *Prelude to Political Economy: A Study of the Social and Political Foundations of Economics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- Dreber, A., D. G. Rand, D. Fudenberg and M. A. Nowak, “Winners don’t punish,” *Nature* 452 (2008), 348–351.
- Elster, J., “Social Norms and Economic Theory,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 3 (1989), 99–117.
- Elster, J., “Rationality and the Emotions,” *The Economic Journal* 106 (1996), 1386–1397.
- Elster, J., “Emotions and Economic Theory,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 36 (1998), 47–74.
- Jafri, A. H., *Honour Killing: Dilemma, Ritual, Understanding* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2008).
- Milinski, M. and B. Rockenbach, “Human behaviour: Punisher pays,” *Nature* 452 (2008), 297–298.
- Nelson, P. J. and K. V. Greene, *Signaling Goodness: Social Rules and Public Choice* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2003).