



Social sanctions – overview, meaning, examples, types and importance

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Abstract

Social sanctions play a crucial role in maintaining social order and regulating behaviour within society. Sanctions are social reactions of approval or disapproval in response to an individual's actions. By enforcing socially acceptable standards of behaviour, social sanctions ensure social cohesion and cooperation, enabling effective functioning of organisations, social groups, and society as a whole. Social norms, which represent typical patterns and rules of behaviour, are upheld and reinforced by social sanctions. They encourage behaviour that aligns with established norms and deter actions that deviate from them. As the enforcement mechanisms of social norms, social sanctions play a pivotal role in shaping and maintaining these norms. They communicate the expectations and standards of behaviour within a society, contributing to creating and preserving social norms. Social sanctions are essential tools for upholding social norms, ensuring social order, and facilitating effective social interaction and exchange. They contribute to the stability and predictability of cultural systems, promoting a cohesive and functioning society.

Introduction

A social sanction is a social reaction of approval or disapproval in response to someone's actions. Social sanctions enforce a standard of behaviour that is deemed socially acceptable and this is essential for society to regulate itself and maintain order. Social cohesion and cooperation depend on social sanctions and they are essential for organisations, social groups and society to work together effectively.

Social sanctions encourage behaviours that are considered to be appropriate and deter behaviours that are not. These representative or typical patterns and rules of behaviour are called social norms (Ehrlich & Levin, 2005). Therefore, a sanction is any reaction from others to the behaviour of an individual or group which has the aim of ensuring that a given social norm is complied with.

Social norms are extremely important for the effective functioning of society and social groups. Society could not exist without social norms and the social sanctions that enforce them (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004). Social norms regulate and regularise group members' behaviour (Feldman, 1984) and social sanctions are an important part of social control processes (Horne, 2001a). Norms and sanctions provide behavioural expectations and standards that make social interaction and exchange possible.

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Social sanctions are the enforcement mechanisms for social norms. They are the tools for shaping and maintaining social norms. Social sanctions are an important method of communicating the nature of social norms, so they have an important role in the creation and maintenance of social norms.

Norms and enforcement through social sanctioning creates a "stickiness" or viscosity that tends to slow the rate of cultural change (Kuper, 2009). This creates cultural stability that makes human behaviour more predictable that reduces the risk that would otherwise be inherent in interaction and exchange.

Examples of social sanctions

Social sanctions are social reactions that represent judgement on others behaviour and can be as subtle as a nod or smile for conformity or a shake of the head or a look of disapproval for nonconformity. Social sanctions are often considered to be punishments, like legal sanctions. However, social sanctions can also be positive for adherence to normative standards.

There are a very wide range of examples of social sanctioning, as well as a range of severity. Not all norms carry the same sanctions because not all norms are of equal importance in a culture.

Negative sanctions can include embarrassment, shame, ridicule, sarcasm, criticism, disapproval, social discrimination, and exclusion as well as more formal sanctions such as penalties and fines.

Positive sanctions can include celebration, congratulation, praise, social recognition, social promotion, and approval, as well as formal sanctions such as awards, bonuses, prizes, and titles.

Sanctions do not have to be activated to be effective. Often the possibility of reward or punishment is enough to encourage conformity. The mere anticipation of probable sanctions is often sufficient to restrain the behaviour in question (Scott & Marshall, 2009). When people perceive that social sanctions exist for noncompliance, they are more likely to conform if they also perceive that the behaviour is widespread among their peers (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005).

Social sanctions are normative

Norms are supported by social sanctions, which are norms in themselves. In any social group there are social sanctions that are considered normal and appropriate and others that are not. For example, in Australia criticism is typical even when it is done openly for relatively low-level infringements of social norms, however, in Japan this would not typically be acceptable, or it would be reserved for only high-level or extreme violations of norms.

Since sanctions are also normative, enforcement and failure to enforce is also sanctionable (Ehrlich & Levin, 2005). Deviance from, or conformance with, social norms can carry normative expectations on third parties to either sanction or not sanction. So sanctioning actions can also be sanctioned, and presumably those sanctioning actions could be sanctioned, and so on as deemed appropriate and required.

This has led some authors to call sanctions metanorms since they are upper-level norms that tell people to reward or punish transgressors of lower-level norms (for example see Axelrod, 1986). In game theory sanctioning of norms is effectively a second-order social dilemma (Axelrod, 1986).

Although sanctioning is normative, the likelihood and strength of sanctions is likely to relate the perceived importance of the norm related to both moral conviction and the potential for individual or group consequences. The likelihood and severity of sanctions also relates to whether it facilitates group wellbeing and survival, perceived risks and costs of sanctioning, and helps avoid interpersonal conflict (Feldman, 1984).

For example, if someone is late to work should their boss order a public flogging? The nature of the sanction for deviation from the group norm is normative, which is based on a range of factors as outlined above.

Types of social sanctions

There are many different sociological interpretations of sanctions and their functioning (Scott & Marshall, 2009). As with many other social phenomena, there have been numerous attempts to classify or categorise different types of social sanctions.

Social sanctions can be informal or formal and can be

internal or external.

Informal social sanctions

Informal sanctions are enacted by individuals or groups upon other individuals or groups without the use of formal systems. There is a very wide array of different types of informal sanctions and they are the workhorse for the creation and maintenance of social norms.

Informal social sanctions are present in virtually every social exchange, even if they are very subtle. This is especially true considering sanctions don't need to be enacted to be effective.

Just as social norms are the everyday workhorse of social control and law is generally for endgames (Pildes, 1996), informal sanctions are the everyday workhorse of maintaining the social control structures and formal sanctions are generally infrequently applied (although their possibility is a constant influence).

Formal social sanctions

Formal sanctions are imposed through formal means by an institution (or representative) upon an individual or group. They are normally clearly defined and can include fines for deviation or rewards for compliance. They are often documented in policy, rules or regulations.

Formal sanctions tend to also have informal consequences. For example, a criminal conviction tends to create a stigma and potential social exclusion.

Internal social sanctions

Internal sanctions are consequences imposed by the individual on themselves, based upon compliance with social norms. So, for example, an individual might suffer from embarrassment, shame or depression as a result of noncompliance and associated exclusion from social groups.

One of the key differences between internal and external sanctions is that while internal sanctions such as guilt requires only one's own knowledge of one's behaviour, external sanctions require knowledge by others of one's behaviour (Knack, 1992).

External social sanctions

External sanctions, on the other hand, are consequences imposed by others and include things like expulsion from a group, public humiliation, punishment by management, and arrest and imprisonment, among others.

Social sanctions for injunctive norms and descriptive norms

Another potentially relevant distinction is between types of norms, since social sanctions are the enforcement mechanism for social norms. The commonly accepted types of norms are descriptive and injunctive.

Descriptive norms are what most people do in a given situation, i.e., what is typical or normal in a given situation can be understood by observing others' behaviour. Injunctive norms describe what ought to be done in a situation so is what a group considers appropriate, moral, or necessary (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). They relate to rules or beliefs as to what constitutes morally approved and disapproved conduct (Cialdini et al., 1990).

This distinction may suggest that social sanctions would only relate to injunctive norms, since these norms represent what is considered right and wrong. However, in reality there can be little difference between how people view injunctive norms and descriptive norms in terms of sanctioning.

Some have suggested that sanctioning relates to injunctive norms and not to descriptive norms (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005), however descriptive norms often take on an ought character even if it is simply to maintain social order. For example, at a popular local café the norm is to move to the right side of the counter after ordering. This is a descriptive norm since there is no moral imperative, it is simply what everyone does. Not observing this norm may still result in sanctioning (both internal [embarrassment] and external [disapproving looks]) despite the lack of moral imperative, since it is what one ought to do to maintain efficiency and social order.

How do we learn what to sanction?

Social sanctioning is learned over time and relates to social values that are internalised through socialisation. Individuals may not be consciously aware of these societal values since they provide the background context for all thought and action. People just 'know' what is appropriate and not appropriate, how to sanction, and what actions are likely to be sanctioned and in what ways.

Social norms and sanctions represent shared understandings that are present in a group or society. They are the understanding of what is good, proper, appropriate, and right. They are based on values (what is right and wrong), which tend to be defined or influenced by law, religion, culture, and numerous other factors.

Who does the sanctioning?

All members of a social group or society tend to sanction and responsibility for sanctioning is jointly shared by all members. However, some individuals tend to sanction more, and their sanctions tend to carry more influence. For example, people who are in positions of higher social status and people who have assigned roles that make them responsible or feel more responsible for social control.

Deviations from social norms may or may not impact (positively or negatively) another person or persons. Where it does, typically a third-party would involve themselves in sanctioning. But what would induce a third-party to get involved, considering the risks and

costs?

For most people there are several reasons to sanction. There are often norms that call for sanctioning of certain actions, so failure to sanction may result in themselves being sanctioned. People also often feel belonging and loyalty to the social group or society and perceive deviation from norms to threaten the wellbeing of the group. They may also feel that it is the good or right thing to do, for the common or group good, so they may be prepared to sanction despite personal costs and risks. Third-party sanctioning is very important and is the essence of social norms (Bendor & Swistak, 2001).

Does sanctioning carry costs or risks?

For the individuals engaging in sanctions, the costs of sanctioning may be greater than the benefits (Coleman, 1990). There can be a danger associated with sanctioning since there is a risk the deviant will retaliate. There is also the risk that person doing the sanctioning may misinterpret the established sanctioning norms or overstep the mark, leaving themselves open to sanctioning, including internal sanctions of shame or guilt.

Social structures typically reduce the costs of sanctioning by moving the responsibility to certain roles, for example police. This can also be true in organisations where management roles may assume these responsibilities, therefore reducing the burden on other members of the organisation. Formal sanctioning (and therefore the threat of formal sanctions) can reduce the costs of sanctioning for individuals by passing it to authorities.

When is sanctioning likely to happen?

Social sanctions are most likely to occur in groups or societies where social norms are clearly established and widely understood. This gives people confidence in how people ought to act, and therefore confidence of whether any given act contradicts the norm.

The norms of sanctioning will also impact whether sanctioning occurs since in some groups sanctioning is normatively rare or considered inappropriate. People observe whether people are sanctioned or rewarded for their behaviours and this influences their sanctioning behaviour (Bandura, 1973). Therefore, sanctioning is most likely to happen when it is normatively prudent.

It may seem that highly cohesive groups would have the conditions for high rates of sanctioning however high group cohesion tends to reduce sanctioning because cohesion increases the costs of sanctioning and therefore decreases the sanctioning frequency (Horne, 2001b).

Social sanctioning typically occurs when it is socially valuable to members of the community (Margolis, 1990). Social sanctions play an important role in the creation and maintenance of social order, which is a desirable state for members of the community since it provides confidence and order. It encourages interaction and

exchange that is the foundation of social capital and the functioning of society.

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