

Informal sanctions

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Abstract

Informal sanctions are actions taken in response to behaviour to encourage conformity or discourage nonconformity to norms, rules, or laws. While sanctions are often associated with punishment or penalty, this perspective overlooks the positive affirmations that also function as sanctions. Informal sanctions are enacted by individuals or groups without formal enforcement roles or systems, making them the everyday mechanism for maintaining social order. Although formal sanctions are infrequently applied but influential, informal sanctions are found to be more effective, and formal sanctions rely on the reinforcement of informal sanctions. Informal sanctions are essential for protecting society from opportunism and socially harmful behaviour, as they permeate virtually every social exchange. They uphold informal agreements and social norms that govern the majority of daily interactions, surpassing explicit, enforceable contracts. While formal rules and laws enforced by formal sanctions exist, they are typically a last resort due to their costs and disadvantages compared to informal social control systems. Informal sanctions possess effectiveness even without enforcement, as the threat or potential for sanctions influences behaviour. Although informal sanctions carry some costs and risks, they are generally lower than those associated with formal sanctions. This paper underscores the significance of informal sanctions in maintaining social order and highlights their effectiveness and lower costs compared to formal sanctions.

Introduction

“No human societies exist without social norms, that is, without normative standards of behavior that are enforced by informal social sanctions.” (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004: p63)

Informal sanctions are actions in response to someone’s behaviour that may serve to discourage nonconformity or encourage conformity to a norm, rule, or law (Khey, 2014). As such, a sanction can be positive or negative, to encourage or discourage actions in line with standards of what is normal, expected, or appropriate. It is common for sanctions to be thought of as a punishment or penalty for inappropriate actions, however, this ignores the role of positive affirmations as sanctions.

What is an informal sanction?

Sanctions can be enacted by any individual or group and are informal when the sanctioner has no formal enforcement role and do not use formal enforcement systems (Chekroun, 2008). There are many different types of informal sanctions and they are the everyday workhorse for the maintenance of social order. Formal sanctions are generally infrequently applied, although they are generally a strong and constant influence (Anderson

et al., 1977). Formal sanctions are most applicable for endgames rather than everyday social control (Pildes, 1996). There is strong evidence to suggest that informal sanctions are more effective than formal sanctions (Paternoster et al., 1983) and formal sanctions can be effective only if they are reinforced by informal sanctions (Wenzel, 2004).

Why are informal sanctions important?

Informal sanctions play a vital role in protecting society from opportunism and socially harmful behaviour (Ellingsen & Johannesson, 2004). Informal social sanctions are present in virtually every social exchange, even if they are very subtle. The importance of informal sanctions stems from the fact that the majority of our daily interactions are not governed by explicit, enforceable contracts but by informal agreements and social norms that are upheld by informal sanctions (Falk et al., 2000).

Social action may be governed by formal rules and laws, enforced by formal sanctions, but these are typically a last resort and generally involve considerable costs and disadvantages relative to informal social control systems that include social norms and the informal social sanctions that uphold them. Informal sanctions are important because while an individual may be able to disguise deviant actions from a formal authority, they are unlikely to be able to hide it from the people they interact with on a daily basis (Spivak et al., 2011).

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Are informal sanctions more effective?

Informal sanctions do not have to be enacted to be effective since the threat or potential for the sanction is often sufficient to have the desired influence. Informal sanctions generally have significantly lower, although different, costs compared to formal sanctions (Baker & Choi, 2013). Informal sanctions may require the sanctioner to sacrifice otherwise beneficial interaction or exchange opportunities and the sanctioning action can carry costs and risks. However, these costs are typically much less than formal sanctions that may require litigation and often produce negative-sum outcomes.

Sanctioning can be a retaliation and may be intentionally hurtful or can be assertive and supportive with the intention of correcting or reinforcing appropriate actions.

Examples of informal sanctions

Informal sanctions that discourage or punish can include embarrassment, shame, ridicule, sarcasm, criticism, disapproval, social discrimination, and exclusion while informal sanctions that encourage and reward can include celebration, congratulation, praise, social recognition, social promotion, and other signals of approval.

Informal sanctions includes any reaction a person might have to express approval or disapproval to an action regulated by norms (Chekroun, 2008). Informal sanctions can be direct, for example disapproving glances, expressions of anger or disapproval, or indirect, for example through gossip and reputational damage (Scrivens, 2013). Informal sanctions are mostly subtle forms of interpersonal approval or disapproval (Cialdini, 2007). Simple examples include a look of disapproval, a frown, or a shake of one's head. More overt informal sanctions include comments that are intended to create embarrassment or shame such as ridicule or sarcasm, as well as social exclusion.

Informal sanctions can be categorised into two types; those that are imposed on oneself and include feelings of embarrassment, guilt and shame; and those that are imposed by others such as exclusion, humiliation, and even the threat of physical violence or formal sanctions.

How do informal sanctions relate to social capital?

Social norms, and the informal sanctions that support them, have been described as one of the most important elements of social capital (Fehr & Gachter, 2000). Norms are included in virtually all conceptualisations of social capital, perhaps with the exception of those utilising the most extreme forms of methodological individualism. Both Putnam (1995) and Coleman (1990) referred explicitly to the importance of social norms. Some scholars have claimed that informal sanctions are a major determinant of a society's social capital because they are key to the enforcement of implicit agreements and social norms (Falk et al., 2000).

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