Social Sanctions in Response to Injunctive Norm Violations

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Abstract

Injunctive social norms are societal standards for how people are expected to behave. When individuals transgress these norms, they face social sanctions for their behavior. These sanctions can take many forms ranging from verbal or non-verbal reactions and from disapproval to ostracism. We review the stable characteristics and situational variables that affect a bystander's tendency to enact social sanctions against someone who violates an injunctive social norm. Stable characteristics include the bystander's extraversion, altruism, the belief that others can change their behavior, and their cultural background. Situational factors include the extent to which the violated norm implicates the bystander, the social hierarchies among the bystander and transgressor, the presence of additional bystanders, and (when applicable) the bystander's relationship to the victim of the norm violation. We also discuss the costs that a bystander can incur by attempting to enact social sanctions. We conclude with a discussion of the application of social sanctions to enforce pro-social social norms.

Keywords: Social Norms, Social Sanctions, Injunctive Norms, Norm Violations

Injunctive social norms are societal standards for how individuals are expected to behave [1, 2]. When made salient, these norms affect attitudes and behavior. Messages highlighting injunctive social norms have been used to encourage energy conservation [3], increase approval of gay marriage [4], increase exercising [5], and promote the inclusion of students from marginalized backgrounds in college classrooms [6]. One explanation for why injunctive norms influence behavior is the fear of repercussions for transgressing (or violating) the norm [7, 8]. These repercussions are an inherent part of injunctive social norms. An injunctive social norm exists when group members believe that others should engage in the behavior and they expect punishment (i.e., social sanctions) for not doing so [9, 10, 11] (note that Bicchieri [9] refers to injunctive norms as "social norms"). Said differently, social sanctions are the defining characteristic of injunctive social norms. When there is no punishment for a norm transgression, it is not an injunctive social norm. In this review, we examine the literature on social sanctions in response to the violation of injunctive social norms.

1.0 Social Sanctions

What are social sanctions? Social sanctions include a variety of verbal and nonverbal reactions to norm transgressions designed to dissuade individuals from engaging in that behavior [12, 13, 14]. Note that several terms, such as social control [e.g., 15] and social norm enforcement [e.g., 16] refer to the same phenomenon as social sanctions; for the purpose of this article, we will refer to any reactions to norm transgressions that punish individuals for engaging in counter-normative behavior as social sanctions. Social sanctions include directly calling out someone for their actions (e.g., scolding someone for littering) or negatively affecting their relationships with others through rumors or gossip [17]. The goal of these sanctions is to change the individual's transgressive behavior, decrease their social position, or some combination of

the two. For example, individuals who violate norms associated with religious observances are likely to be sanctioned by those aiming to re-enforce the traditional (normative) behavior [18]. One extreme example of social sanctioning is ostracism, the exclusion of an individual from the group. Because ostracism is highly aversive [19], the threat of isolation in response to deviations from the approved behavior of one's group motivates behavior change [20]. Even when sanctions are delayed, the threat of being labeled as uncooperative increases the likelihood that one will contribute toward a collective goal [21]. Social sanctions (or the threat thereof) communicate and enforce a group's injunctive norms.

Social sanctions are particularly important in reducing harmful (or anti-social) behavior. For example, peers expressing disapproval of driving under the influence of alcohol is an effective tool to prevent drunk driving, particularly when paired with an alternative, socially approved means of transportation [22]. Professional athletes report that potential social sanctions in the form of negative press coverage and hostility from other players for being caught blood doping are a greater deterrent to blood doping than the legal repercussions [23]. Social sanctions likely also contributed to the observance of lockdowns in the early phases on the COVID-19 pandemic; during that period of time, individuals reported being willing to punish those who violated social norms related to compliance with lockdown regulations [24].

But what causes a bystander to administer social sanctions or not? Which psychological processes play a role in a bystander's decision to speak up? Below, we will discuss the stable characteristics and situational variables that predict social sanctioning. We then briefly explore the costs of enacting sanctions and how to increase the likelihood of social sanctioning to promote pro-social behavior.

1.1 Stable Characteristics Predicting Social Sanctioning

Some individuals are more likely to confront the perpetrator of a norm transgression than other individuals. What distinguishes them? Research has shown that there are several stable characteristics – dispositions, beliefs, and cultural background – that influence a bystander's tendency to enact social sanctions.

Recent research has shown that the following dispositional characteristics are related to a bystander's tendency to enact social sanctions for norm transgressions: Sensitivity to injustice, extraversion, altruism, a sense of social responsibility, a sense of acceptance by peers, an independent self-construal (i.e., the willingness to express divergent opinions), strong emotion regulation skills, and self-directedness [25]. Bystanders are also more likely to speak up if they believe that norm violators can change their behavior (i.e., whether the bystander has a growth rather than fixed mindset regarding the opinions and behavior of others) [26, 27].

Individuals who have more social power may be particularly motivated to enact sanctions because they feel responsible for maintaining social hierarchies [28]. These powerful individuals tend to sanction others if failing to confront transgressors will decrease their status [29]. Because bystanders may assume that norm transgressors have the freedom to challenge existing social hierarchies maintained by social norms, high status individuals enact sanctions to maintain their own prestige and dominance [30]. Those with low status can also be motivated to enact social sanctions. In an experiment in which participants were asked to contribute a portion of their resources to a shared pool, those who started with fewer resources were less permissive of social loafing than those who started with more resources [31].

Interestingly, one's perception of whether sanctioning will be effective depends on the race and social identities of the bystander. When asked to evaluate the persuasiveness of a

bystander correcting a racist remark, White participants rated White bystanders as more persuasive than Black bystanders [32]. These results align with the stereotype that Black people excessively complain about racism and are thus disregarded when enacting sanctions. As such, a Black bystander may be disinclined to confront a White individual who violates an anti-racism norm if they believe that their sanction will be ignored. Case et al. [33] recommend understanding the likelihood of enacting sanctions when witnessing discrimination through an intersectional lens. According to this lens, individuals have multiple intersecting identities (e.g., one's gender, race, religion) that inform their relative power within a social setting. Because individuals with more power are more likely to enact sanctions, if researchers aim to predict who will enact sanctions, they must consider these intersecting identities and the resulting social power afforded to each individual.

Cultural factors and group membership are further determinants of social sanctioning. In so-called "tight" cultures (i.e., cultures that are less tolerant of norm transgressions), individuals are more likely to administer social sanctions [34]. Further, those in collectivistic cultures are more likely to express moral outrage in response to norm violations and are more likely to socially sanction compared to those in individualistic cultures [35, 36, 37]. It should be noted that differences between collectivistic and individualistic cultures regarding sanctioning are not always consistent between studies [38]. One reason why some researchers may not find these cultural differences is that the appropriateness of administering sanctions in any given culture depends on the type of sanctions being administered. Sanctions in the form of ostracism and direct confrontation are considered more appropriate in collectivistic cultures whereas gossip is considered more appropriate in individualistic cultures [39]. In sum, while the current consensus is that belonging to a culture which prioritizes the in-group and emphasizes the maintenance of

social norms increases the likelihood of social sanctioning, researchers must also consider how sanctions are administered when examining cross-cultural differences in norm enforcement.

Taken together, the prototypical bystander who opts to enact social sanctions (particularly in the form of face-to-face confrontation) is outgoing, feels accepted by their peers, is confident in their opinions, possesses strong opinions about injustice, has a growth mindset, and comes from a cultural background which emphasizes the importance of maintaining social norms and approves of direct confrontation.

1.2 Situational Predictors of Social Sanctioning

While outgoing, justice-minded individuals may be more likely to enact sanctions overall, a bystander's decision to intervene depends on several variables that change from one situation to the next.

Individuals will administer social sanctions when the violated norm is related to their self-concept, (i.e., when they care about the social norm). The likelihood of sanctioning increases with the feeling of being personally affected by the transgression [35, 17], seeing oneself as responsible for upholding the social norm [40], or perceiving that one could personally benefit from sanctioning the norm transgressor [41]. Bystanders are more likely to enact sanctions if a norm transgression elicits a strong negative emotional reaction, such as anger, which is particularly likely if the transgression harms another person [25, 42, 43, 44, 45]. Otherwise stated, in instances where a norm violation directly harms someone, a bystander may opt to sanction a norm transgressor out of anger felt on behalf of the victim. These findings are akin to recent findings on the bystander effect identifying that people will intervene when a situation becomes violent and preventing harm is a necessity [46, 47, 48]. Even when people enact sanctions for altruistic purposes as a third party, they do not do so as harshly as those directly

affected by the norm violation [49]. Thus, sanctions are most likely to occur when the situation causes a bystander to feel that they have something to gain from enacting the sanctions. Individuals are also more likely to engage in social sanctioning when the injunctive norm being transgressed is followed by more people [50, 41].

People's perception of other bystanders affects the likelihood that they engage in social sanctioning. The presence of additional bystanders reduces the likelihood of sanctioning (although this effect diminishes the more an individual feels personally implicated by the transgression) [15]. Furthermore, the response from other bystanders informs the strength of the norm, such that a lack of response from other bystanders indicates a weaker injunctive norm [51]. The likelihood of sanctioning increases if there is a power imbalance among bystanders such that the bystander with more power is expected to enact the sanctions [52].

The relationship between the bystander, the norm transgressor, and (in instances where a norm transgression harms another person) the victim also determines the likelihood of sanctioning. Bystanders are more likely to administer sanctions when the norm transgressor belongs to a low power group or to a historically marginalized group [29, 53, 54]. Individuals are also more likely to enact social sanctions when an ingroup member transgresses compared to an outgroup member [12, 55]. For example, in one experimental manipulation, participants reported greater disapproval of counter-normative behavior when the norm transgressor was from the same rather than a different country as the participant [56]. Likewise, transgressors are given stronger punishments if their transgression victimizes an ingroup member [57] or violates a norm an individual believes is particularly central to their cultural identity [18]. Individuals report having a greater desire to enact sanctions when the transgressor is less familiar to them and when they have a close relationship with the victim [43]. Note, however, that the desire to sanction

may not always predict people's actual tendency to enact these sanctions; subsequent research has identified that people report being more likely to sanction their acquaintances than strangers [58].

Taken together, a bystander is more likely to enact sanctions when they feel personally affected or made angry by the transgression, can benefit from sanctioning, their social identity gives them reason to believe they can effectively enact sanctions, they feel uniquely positioned among other bystanders to enact sanctions, and when the norm transgression was committed by an ingroup member.

1.3 The Cost of Social Sanctioning

Social sanctions do not come without costs. Social sanctions are meant to enforce social norms, but transgressors may have negative feelings about being sanctioned and may retaliate against the person enforcing the norm [59]. These costs are understood by bystanders and play an important role in their decision to intervene. For example, those who desire to maintain harmonious relationships and avoid conflict are less likely to sanction others on social media for fear of social costs [60]. Angry or hostile emotions that result from confrontations can dissuade other bystanders, ultimately decreasing the likelihood of enforcing the social norm [61, 62]. Likewise, the more severe the initial norm violation, the more individuals report fearing backlash for enacting social sanctions [63]. The potential for negative backlash to social sanctions aligns with historical social power structures, such that those most at risk of experiencing negative consequences for enforcing norms belong to historically marginalized groups. For example, women are evaluated less positively for calling out sexist comments than men [64, 65]. Furthermore, when an individual is aware of the costs of social sanctions, they are far less likely to enact sanctions against norm transgressors if they perceive that the norm transgressor only

harms others (i.e., the norms transgression poses no risk to the would-be norm enforcer) [66, 67]. As such, those who may have the most to benefit from enacting sanctions also contend with the greatest costs.

The costs of social sanctions are compounded when the sanctions themselves violate other existing social norms. For example, a social sanction that includes an aggressive confrontation for a benign transgression may violate an injunctive norm of politeness and lead other bystanders to perceive the person enforcing the norm as a transgressor [68]. Likewise harsher sanctions lead to greater disapproval towards the norm enforcer (i.e., the bystander who enacts the sanctions) [69]. Conversely, when social sanctions are communicated respectfully, the norm transgressor is more likely to assign pro-social motives to the norm enforcer [70]. Additionally, sanctions will be viewed more favorably if the bystanders ascribe pro-social rather than self-serving motives to the norm enforcer [71]. Taken together, if an individual does not know how to enact sanctions respectfully or without communicating their motives and thus risks violating a social norm themselves, the costs of social sanctioning may prevent them from doing so.

While the concern over backlash can decrease the likelihood of social sanctions, several individual or situational factors diminish this concern. As previously mentioned, anger can increase the likelihood that one enacts social sanctions. Because anger alters perceptions of risk [72], anger may be particularly powerful in overcoming the backlash concerns. Otherwise stated, anger may temporarily distort a bystander's risk perception, causing them to underestimate the potential for backlash and focus their attention on punishing the transgressor. A similar pattern occurs in mediated environments like social media. On social media bystanders are more likely

to enact sanctions because they perceive few costs [16]. In short, circumstances that reduce the perceived costs of sanctioning, increase the likelihood a bystander enacts sanctions.

Given the risk of potential backlash, an individual's decision to enact sanctions is the result of an interplay between the stable characteristics and situational factors for sanctioning and the fallout for doing so. For this reason, individuals may opt to sanction norm transgressors when they are emotionally prepared to buffer themselves from potential backlash [73]. Feeling personally implicated by transgressions and not fearing backlash for sanctioning may explain why individuals who are acquainted with norm transgressors are more likely to enforce sanctions than those for whom the transgressor is a stranger [53].

1.4 Can Social Sanctions Promote Behavior Change?

Since injunctive norms impact behavior and social sanctions enforce these norms, we propose that social sanctions can promote compliance with (normative) pro-social behavior. However, because of the previously discussed factors decreasing the likelihood of sanctioning, individuals may not be willing to enact these sanctions without encouragement. As such, researchers have developed trainings to prepare individuals to enact pro-social social sanctions [74, 75]. Individuals often overestimate their willingness to enforce norms and confront transgressors, whether they are the target of discrimination [76] or witness discrimination [77, 78]. This overestimation of one's willingness to enforce norms may be a result of individuals feeling uncertain about how to do so when they are in the situation [79]. Thus, interventions that allow individuals to practice the sanctioning of discriminatory behavior [e.g., 80], appoint specific individuals with high social power to call out discriminatory behavior [e.g., 81], or help those facing discrimination reduce the likelihood of facing social costs for sanctioning others [e.g., 82] may be particularly beneficial. Note that while we have focused on the context of

discrimination, the use of social sanction trainings could be applied to a variety of contexts such as bystander intervention training to prevent sexual and intimate partner violence [83]. Furthermore, our intention is not to encourage people to monitor each other's behavior in all situations and sanction minor transgressions of unimportant norms. Specifically, we call upon researchers to continue their investigations into interventions that help people speak up in high-stakes social situations where individuals may be hesitant to intervene, but doing so is particularly valuable.

2.0 Conclusion

Injunctive social norms have a powerful effect on behavior, and social sanctions play a key role in enforcing these norms. Whether someone sanctions another person for transgressing a social norm largely depends on the disposition of the individual who enacts the social sanctions, the power dynamics between the perpetrator and the other bystanders, a cultural emphasis on maintaining the group's existing structure, the context in which the transgression occurs, the relationship between the transgressor and bystander, and the fear of backlash for enacting sanctions. While individuals may be hesitant to speak out in high stakes situations because of fear for the social repercussions for sanctioning, developing interventions to help people enact sanctions for social issues like discrimination would further our understanding of norm enforcement while simultaneously improving society.

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