SOC112: Social Control of Deviant Behavior

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Prevention as "Ante-Deviance"

Generically, prevention is social control that is a response to deviations from rules that occurs before the deviation does. Black notes that in addition to penal, compensatory, therapeutic, and conciliatory social control, "still another strategy focuses on the opportunity to engage in deviant behavior, either by altering the situation of potential deviants or by altering the habits of potential victims. This is prevention" (8.7).

Another way to look at this is to see punishment, compensation, therapeutic intervention, conciliation all as indicators of the failure of the social control system to keep people in line. They are, in a sense, back up systems.

How to accomplish ante-crime control? Black says:

> Potential deviants might be subjected to greater surveillance (known in modern police work as preventative patrol), for example, or they might be deprived of their freedom of movement (known in modern penology as preventive detention and incapacitation), and potential victims might be encouraged to reduce their vulnerability (known by modern specialists in crime prevention as target hardening).

Conventional wisdom suggests that prevention is a very efficient approach to social order: "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."[1]

Vaccines, safety equipment, aspirin a day, good diet & exercise, apple a day, etc.

But is it always the case? What is the underlying logic?

Consider the following motives or rationales for punishing rule-breaking:

To visit upon a perpetrator a measure of pain or discomfort or inconvenience that is on par with the offense s/he committed as an expression of the group's collective displeasure.

To balance whatever attractiveness an act of rule breaking may have with some unattractive response so as to remove any incentive to engage in rule breaking.

To teach the perpetrator a lesson.

To be a lesson for others.

This is what happens to offenders.

This is where the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable behavior lies.

To make it so the perpetrator cannot repeat his/her offense.

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The Utilitarian Logic of Deterrence

Basic ideas of punishment as prevention can be found in the rational model of man (sic) promulgated by Adam Smith and in the behaviorist psychology of Ivan Pavlov (winner of

[1] Also: A stitch in time saves nine. Spare the rod, spoil the child. The punishment should fit the crime. Also, note how many other bits of social control have proverbs/maxims: An eye for an eye. Turn the other cheek. Do unto others….

1904 Nobel Prize in Medicine [http://nobelprize.org/medicine/laureates/1904/pavlov-bio.html]) and B. F. Skinner. People choose behaviors on the basis of their perceived benefit from the behavior. If we want people to refrain from a behavior, we need to make the costs associated with engaging in it more than the perceived benefits.

Every time you stay out past your curfew, you get grounded. After a while, you start coming home on time. The higher the taxes on cigarettes, the fewer people will choose to smoke. The more certain the death penalty is for killing law enforcement officers, the fewer law enforcement officers will be killed in the line of duty.

Two versions of this logic. The first is simple. Assume that breaking some rule will get you a benefit worth $10. If I make the penalty for breaking the rule also $10, then the incentive for breaking it disappears.

But, you say, what if it is not certain you will be caught. Very good point, but we can build that into the system. Suppose there is a 25% chance you will be caught. Then we make the penalty $40 and you can expect to be caught one time in four. Your benefit from four infractions is $40 and your expected loss is also $40 so, no incentive to break the rule. If we only expect to catch you one time in ten, then let's make the penalty $100.

This way of thinking about it introduces a concept that may be new to some of us: "expected value." Put simply, the expected value of an action is the benefit times the likelihood of a benefit minus the cost times the likelihood of a cost. Suppose, for example, you buy a lottery ticket for $1 and the prize is one million dollars and the chances of winning are one in two million. Here's how we calculate the expected value of the ticket:

Benefit x Likelihood of Benefit - Cost x Likelihood of Cost

$$= \$1{,}000{,}000 \times \frac{1\,chance}{2{,}000{,}000\,chances} - \$1 \times 100\%$$

= $0.50 - $1.00

= - 50 cents.

Definition: Expected value of behavior ≡ E(B) = B(B) x P(BB) – C(B) x P(CB)

Where E(B) = expected value of behavior

B(B) = benefit of behavior

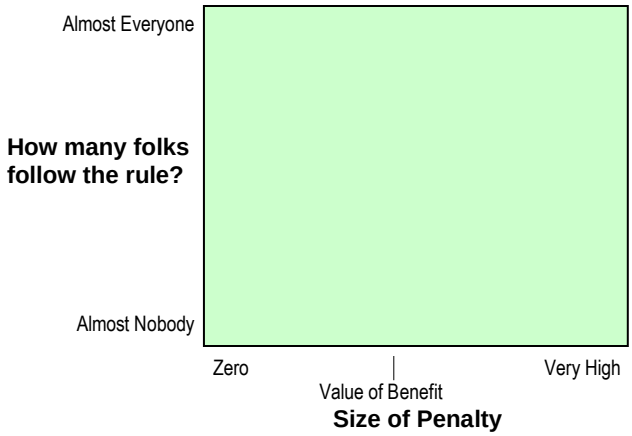
P(BB) = probability of a benefit from the behavior

C(B) = cost of behavior

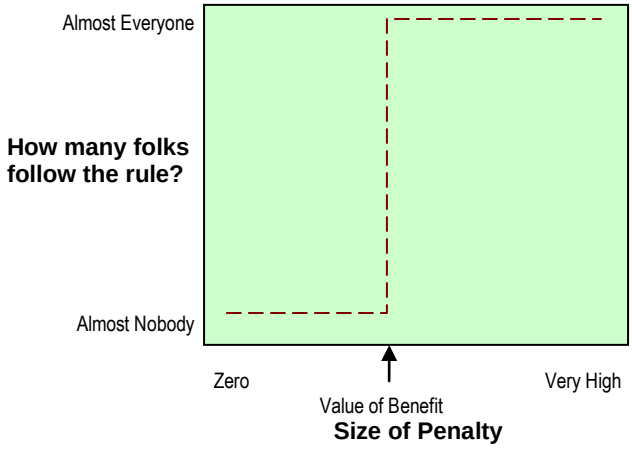
P(CB) = probability of a benefit from the behavior

(See also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Expected_value)

Let's draw a picture of this:

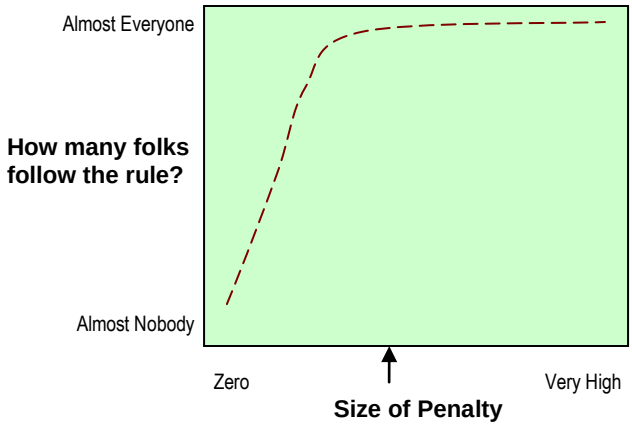


One scenario would be that as soon as the penalty equals the benefit, everyone will stop engaging in the behavior.[2] This would gives us a behavior response graph that looks like this:

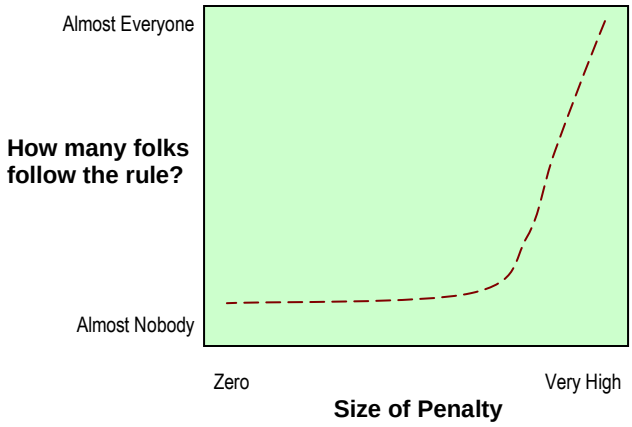


Another theoretical possibility is that as soon as there is any possible cost, most people will follow the rule. This would look like this:

2 Or, at least they will stop breaking the rule because of the benefits they derive from it.

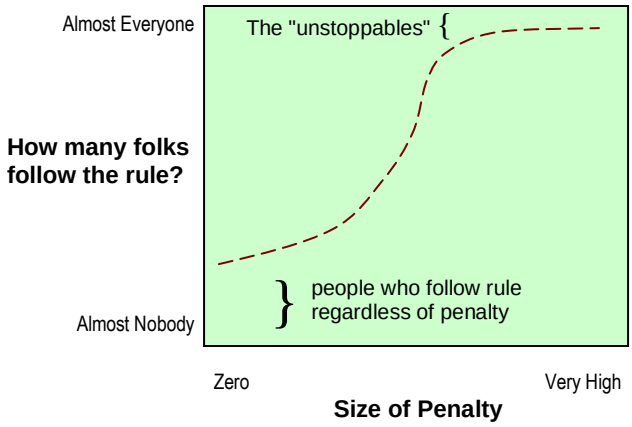


And yet another scenario is that until the fine gets pretty hefty, almost nobody will follow the rule:



Or maybe there is a linear response: each time we nudge up the penalty, a few fewer people break the rule.

But let's think about the real world. How much is parking illegally in a disabled space worth to you? Some folks just think it's wrong to do it and they'd not park there even if there were no tickets. To some people in some situations it would be a bit of convenience, but not something they'd risk any size citation for. Others might consider their needs in certain circumstances to be pretty big and worth event the risk of a ticket, even a big one. And still others just don't care at all about getting a ticket. And, different people assess the likelihood of getting caught differently. Only a trained social scientist or police department insider could really know how likely one is to get caught parking in a disabled spot.



But is this the only way that punishments or other reactions have their effects?