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*Excerpts from Steve Denning's contributions to an ongoing dialogue
in the com-prac listserv – a Yahoo group.¹*

Rules, values and communities

An article appeared in the New York Times citing an experiment that claimed to show that groups that had systems of punishments for non-contributors outperformed groups that had no such systems of punishments. The article is set out at the end of this paper.

Do punishments help communities?

MY COMMENTS:

It is however important to note, as the article does, that this is a one-time laboratory experiment about the narrow goal of making money by a bunch of students who might never see each other again.

The article cites the important caveat of "other experts" who say: "Out in the world, they said, it is not usually so clear who is free-riding, or even whether a given group is encouraging cooperative behavior in most people."

There are also other caveats to be kept in mind as well.

Out there in the real world, one has to take into consideration, in deciding whether setting up a system of punishments makes sense for a community, the social costs of setting up and maintaining systems of punishments.

In order to have a system of punishments, you have to establish explicit rules that determine what will constitute "infractions"; you have to get agreement that everyone will live by these rules; you have to maintain and adjust the rules, as conditions change;

¹ The piece is not intended to be, and does not purport to be, a full account of what transpired in the whole conversation at com-prac. The views expressed here are my views on a specific set of issues. If you would like to go to the full discussion, join the group and check it out, starting at:
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/com-prac/message/6323>

you have to have people designated to detect infractions, people to administer the punishments; people to adjudicate disputes; and also measures to determine what to do if the adjudicators or punishers don't do their job or get out of hand; and so on. These costs are not trivial. If the community is a continuing phenomenon, the meaning of all this paraphernalia can easily end up sinking the original purpose of the community.

In the laboratory experiment, the organizers of the experiment did all that work for the one-time experiment with a group of students with a system of punishments and imposed the rules on the participants. The group without punishments had no such costs.

The experiment would have been more "realistic", the group with the system of punishments had also had to bear the social costs of deciding whether to have a system of punishments, what rules to set up, how they were going to be adjudicated, how enforced and so on. Then they might have found that the group with punishments was still arguing about the system of rules for punishments while the group without punishments had finished its work long before.

Moreover the one-time laboratory experiment had no particular meaning for the students involved. It was a one-time thing. They were there to make a bit of money at the expense of the university. They might probably never see the participants or the organizers again. The experience had no lasting meaning in their lives.

In real-world communities, the meaning of the community is usually central. Are these people we want to associate with, and if so, how do we want to organize ourselves? Is it going to be by a system of bureaucratic rules and punishments? Or is it going to be one where the meaning of the community is continuously negotiated by the exchange of narratives?

We might be prepared to put up with bureaucratic system of rules in a one-time experiment that doesn't mean anything to us. It's quite another thing to go along with this for a community with which we may be involved in for years, where we have a real choice whether to belong to it or not.

Finally, the object of the experiment was the narrow one of making some money. This is rarely the objective of real-world communities, particularly communities of practice. It is unclear whether the dynamic would be the same, when the objective is so much less clear cut and less mercenary.

Overall, we should be cautious about drawing wide-ranging conclusions from this one-time laboratory experiment for real-world communities.

How scientific is this kind of psychological research?

One participant wrote: "studies like this are far from one-off experiments. In fact there is a decades long stream of both clinical and observational research on group collective goods and the organizations and institutions around them."

MY REPLY:

When I wrote about this "one-time experiment", I was referring to the short duration of the experiment, as opposed to an experiment that went on for weeks or months or years, like most communities. The dynamic of a short-duration experiment ("let's get this over with and then I'm out of here with as much money as I can make from the university in as short a time as possible") is very different from the dynamic of an involvement in a genuine community ("is this a group of people that I want to have an ongoing relationship with and spend quality time hanging out with over an extended period of time?")

I didn't mean imply that there aren't lots of other laboratory experiments in experimental psychology on groups. Many of those experiments, alas, are characterized by the same extreme naivete that we see in the New York Times article writing about the German experiment.

In those psychological experiments, usually conducted on college students by professors fighting the challenge of "publish or perish", there is often a touching obliviousness to the huge role being played by the experimenter, and a stunning gullibility in the extrapolations made from an artificial laboratory situation to real-life.

When reading these experiments, I am tempted to shout: Where's the section discussing what the students themselves thought was happening? What was their motivation for getting involved? What conclusions did they draw from it? What are the possible alternative explanations? What's the story of what's really going on here?

In the world of experimental psychology, such a discussion would usually receive the ultimate put-down: "Unscientific!" But if science was really the driving force here, where's the effort to *disprove* the hypothesis under study, a la Karl Popper? Many of these psychology experiments are like physics experiments that prove that the sun revolves around the earth by showing observations of the sun apparently revolving around the earth. We are here in the world of pseudo-science, not true science. There is insufficient intellectual rigor being applied to call it genuine science.

There is of course a certain kind of person who is attracted to this world. It is the same kind of person who enjoys bureaucratic organizations with their systems of rules and punishments. Such systems are not without their value in some settings: they are governed by abstractions and have the advantage of consistency.

One drawback of such systems however is that they are not very agile or imaginative, hence the current emergence of teams, communities and networks, which run on passion,

and thrive on narrative and are capable of innovation. When you let the people who revel in rules, punishments and abstractions start intervening in teams, communities and networks and imposing their abstract habits of thought on them, then the spirit wilts, the passion dies and the teams, communities and networks degenerate into ... bureaucracies.

Do communities need rules or values?

One participant wrote: "well, its just my opinion, but I find that a set of shared values about what is good or not, plus an active and wide-based leadership, are quite a good paraphernalia for producing and implementing CoP rules :-)."

MY COMMENTS:

I sense that we are saying similar things, and there are probably some participants of this list asking themselves: is this yet another of those irritating linguistic discussions, devoid of substance?

Well, I admit that there is a linguistic issue here, but it has also has substantive implications. So let me try to separate the two. For anyone who doesn't like linguistic discussions, you can jump right to the substance.

1. LINGUISTIC ISSUE

One thing that seems to be separating us is that you are regarding "rules" as the same thing as "values", whereas common usage treats "rules" as quite different from "values". Rules tend to be explicit, whereas values tend to be implicit. Rules tend to be abstract whereas values tend to be grounded in narrative. You see values as inevitably having rules accompany them, whereas common usage suggests that you can have rules without values, and values without rules, as well as both or neither.

I also get the sense that you prefer to look at the human world as a collection of rules: i.e. "rules are inevitable" and "values are paraphernalia for producing and implementing rules".

Your views have distinguished antecedents. In the 1950s, the English philosopher R.M.Hare made a heroic attempt to understand ethics wholly in terms of rules, starting with his book *The Language of Morals*. Half a century later, you don't hear this kind of argument very often among philosophers any more. The whole effort collapsed under its own weight. It turned out to involve an oversimplification of the world, and the effort to describe morality in these terms resulted in massive conceptual problems.

My suggestion would be that we learn from that experience and not try to resurrect the attempt. Rules are related to values, but they are different. They are useful for different things in different settings.

2. SUBSTANTIVE ISSUE

The substantive issue emerges when people who view the world only in terms of rules and punishments start trying to make them the centerpiece of teams, communities and networks.

Rules and punishments are naturally at home in the world of hierarchies and bureaucracies.

By contrast, communities, teams and networks tend to flourish on shared values, which are established by actions and transmitted by narratives. You may find a community with the occasional area where people with shared values can't seem to agree (e.g. whether a public park should be used by dogs on leashes or dogs without leashes) and the community might have to decide on a rule to solve the problem. But the rule is necessary as a kind of last resort. If the community has hundreds of rules of what you can and can't do, with punishments enforced for infractions, and so on, then it has probably ceased being a community long ago and has degenerated into a bureaucracy or worse.

So when people start trying to introduce rules and punishments in communities, teams and networks, then it might be useful to ask: is this a necessary step to solving a specific issue for the group to function effectively? Or is it an attempt to introduce a general way of running the group through rules and punishments? If it is the former, it may well be ok. If it is the latter, my guess is that you are about to kill the community.

How do you generate trust?

One participant wrote: "building ... will require forms of communication, information, and trust that are broad and deep beyond precedent, but not beyond possibility". My interest is in how such trust can be developed and sustained."

MY REPLY:

You might want to look at a recently published book, *Why?* by Charles Tilly, which makes the very important distinction between abstract explanations (conventions and codes) and narrative explanations (stories and technical accounts).

Tilly makes the important point that abstract explanations (like systems of punishments) tend to be divisive and keep people apart and get in the way of deeper communication, whereas narrative explanations can enable people to understand and heal their differences.

Malcolm Gladwell's review in *The New Yorker* cites some of the very interesting and moving work on restorative justice along these lines at:

http://www.newyorker.com/printables/critics/060410crbo_books

Where I have a quibble with the book is Tilly's taxonomy of explanations, which sorts them into four categories, not two:

1. Conventions
2. Stories
3. Codes
4. Technical accounts.

What's the difference between conventions and codes? It turns out that "codes" are "high-level conventions", i.e. fancy conventions, but still conventions.

And what's the difference between stories and technical accounts? It turns out that "technical accounts" are "stories informed by specialized knowledge and authority," i.e. fancy stories, but still stories.

It seems that what we really have are two basic categories: (a) abstract conventions/codes and (b) stories. The big split - and the big merit of the book - is the distinction between abstract explanations and narrative explanations. Having four categories just confuses things.

With this clarification in mind, the book makes a very useful contribution to the questions you raise.

You might also look at Chapter 7 of my book, *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*, which gives a number of practical applications of narrative to enhance trust and collaboration.

NYT: Study Links Punishment to an Ability to Profit

New York Times: April 7, 2006

By BENEDICT CAREY

Sociologists have long known that communes and other cooperative groups usually collapse into bickering and disband if they do not have clear methods of punishing members who become selfish or exploitative.

Now an experiment by a team of German economists has found one reason punishment is so important: Groups that allow it can be more profitable than those that do not.

Given a choice, most people playing an investment game created by the researchers initially decided to join a group that did not penalize its members. But almost all of them quickly switched to a punitive community when they saw that the change could profit them personally.

The study, appearing today in the journal *Science*, suggests that groups with few rules attract many exploitative people who quickly undermine cooperation. By contrast, communities that allow punishment, and in which power is distributed equally, are more likely to draw people who, even at their own cost, are willing to stand up to miscreants.

...

Other experts said the results were an important demonstration of how self-interest can trump people's aversion to punitive norms, at least in the laboratory. Out in the world, they said, it is not usually so clear who is free-riding, or even whether a given group is encouraging cooperative behavior in most people.

"The mystery, if there is one, is how these institutions evolve in the first place," Duncan J. Watts, a sociologist at Columbia, wrote in an e-mail message, "i.e., before it is apparent to anyone that they can resolve the problem of cooperation."

For the full article:

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/07/science/07punish.html?_r=3&adxnnl=1&oref=slogin&adxnnlx=1144488291-OXvQ0n6gGSMDzY6VgP3gYg