Required Annotations		Student-Created Annotations		Summary / Questions / Reflection	

Student-created	Required (bold)

Human behavior is not governed only by rational decision making. Societies often have shared values and standards of acceptable behavior that members of the society are encouraged to follow. A culture or a society guides the behavior and the thoughts of their members by agreed upon expectations and rules. The list of behavioral guidelines is typically referred to as social norms and taboos. These norms and taboos have a huge effect on our lives. The way we behave, dress, eat, and drive, as well as our sex life, are all governed by the norms and taboos of the societies we belong to. While there is an extensive literature on social norms, taboos were mainly discussed by anthropologists that have documented and analyzed taboos in different (typically exotic) societies.

The term taboo is of Polynesian origin (the words "tabu" or "tapu" in the Tongan language) and was introduced to the English language only in the eighteenth century. The original Polynesian term has a specific religious association—see also the famous book *Totem and Taboo* (Sigmund Freud 1955). According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, taboo is defined as "the prohibition of an action based on the belief that such behaviour is either too sacred and **consecrated** or too dangerous and accursed for ordinary individuals to undertake."

Taboos may include restrictions on sexual activities. Other taboos relate to dietary restrictions like Halal and kosher diets for Muslims and Jewish people, eating beef by Hindus, or cannibalism in most societies. Taboos can be repugnant and appalling actions or behavior which includes the display of some bodily functions. Almost all these taboos are not universal and, according to Freud, incest is probably the only universal taboo.

Another important set of taboos involves "taboo tradeoffs" that can **entail** putting a monetary value on "sacred" values like life, love, friendship, or religion. For example being asked to estimate the monetary worth of one's children, of one's loyalty to his friends or country is considered by most people morally offensive, and as a violation of a taboo (see Alan Page Fiske and Philip E. Tetlock 1997 and Tetlock et al. 2000).

The list of taboos and their importance may change over

time. Some taboos may weaken or even disappear, while others may become stronger and more dominant. For example, child insurance and life insurance were for a long time taboos and then became acceptable (see Viviana A. Zelizer 1978, 1981). Trades of human organs are still a taboo in most societies, but some forms of trade became acceptable (see Alvin E. Roth 2007).

There are various explanations for the origin of taboos. The typical **anthropological** argument is that the origin of taboos is cultural experience. The alternative explanation is **psychoanalytical**, emphasizing the strong subconscious prohibitions that pass through generations (see Freud 1955). But what is the difference between taboos and social norms? One interpretation is that taboos are strong social norms; norms which are sufficiently strong that may be viewed as sacred. Every time an individual's behavior diverges from a norm, this act impacts on the other members of society, who then punish the deviant individual (see for example George A. Akerlof 1976, 1980; Cole, Mailath, and Postlewaite 1998; and Young 2008). Taboos can therefore be viewed as strong social norms that are supported by severe social sanctions.

But there is an additional aspect of taboos that may distinguish them from social norms. Taboos are sometimes referred to as doing the "unthinkable." Even thinking about violating a taboo is problematic. The **sanctions** associated pertain not just to the behavior that contradicts the taboo, but also merely thinking or considering such a behavior. Under this interpretation, a taboo is a form of "thought police" that governs not just human behavior, but also its thoughts. Tetlock et al.(2000) considered taboo tradeoffs in terms of "The Psychology of the Unthinkable." The concept of taboo tradeoffs focuses indeed on the mental exercise of thinking, and not on the action itself. "People reject certain comparisons because they feel that seriously considering the relevant tradeoffs would undercut their self image and social identities as moral beings," (see also, Fiske and Tetlock 1997, 256). The emphasis in taboo-tradeoffs is about considering the tradeoffs between sacred values and monetary gains and not about carrying out these tradeoffs. [...]

Taboos are enforced by social punishment. The most familiar social punishment involves the attitudes and reactions of other members of society. For such social punishment to be effective, behavior must be observable. But how can someone be punished for having "dirty" thoughts? Thoughts are not observable. But

social punishment can also be self-inflicted (see also, Bénabou and Tirole 2004). When talking about taboos-tradeoffs Joseph Raz claims that, "It diminishes one's potentiality as a human being to put a value on one's friendship in terms of improved living conditions," Raz (1986, 22). Similarly, Fiske and Tetlock (1997) claim that "to attach a monetary value to one's friendship or one's children or one's loyalty to one's country, is to disqualify one from certain social roles. People feel that making such an evaluation demonstrates that one is not a true friend, or parent, or citizen," Fiske and Tetlock (1997, 256). Taboos are an important part of any social identity. Adopting an identity implies accepting the taboos and the social norms associated with this identity. The desire to maintain an identity and to view oneself as a moral person as defined by one's identity is an important consideration that defines the self-inflicted cost of thinking about violating a taboo.

What is the advantage of using taboos rather than social norms to regulate a certain behavior? In order to answer this question, consider, for example, a situation that occurs only with a very small probability, but in this situation a certain behavior or action entails high private benefit. Assume now that society wishes to curb such a behavior. Social norms that penalize only the actions may be ineffective as deterrence as they require harsh punishments. The high private benefits should be balanced with severe social sanctions in order to deter such a behavior. But social sanctions have a limit (see Cole, Mailath, and Postlewaite 1998). On the other hand, taboos that penalize for merely considering a deviation may impose a much lower penalty that is nonetheless sufficient to deter individuals from thinking about the option to deviate. To illustrate this structure, consider the taboo against cannibalism. When someone is starving, the private benefit of deviating from this taboo may be large. Thus the only way to deter such a behavior is to impose a taboo prohibiting individuals even to consider such an act.

Some taboos are prohibited under the law, and transgressions may lead to severe punishment. For example, there are laws against trade in human organs; there are laws against underage sex, pornography, etc. In some countries, there are laws against homosexuality, and, in others, dietary restrictions are also enforced by law. Clearly some taboos are also regulated by religious practices. Generally speaking, in every society there are three types of incentives that govern individuals' behavior:

private rewards such as any monetary incentives; social incentives such as norms, taboos, social prestige; and legal incentives that enforce certain types of behavior and penalize deviations. Clearly, there are activities which are both taboo and illegal. What determines the exact mix of these types of incentives, and why this mix is different in different societies, is one of the important questions in the social sciences.

What other advantage may society obtain from taboos? One explanation is that sometimes thoughts, **per se**, create negative **externalities**. Taboos-tradeoffs provide examples for such externalities. Making the tradeoff evaluations undermine the meaning of friendship, love, loyalty, family ties, etc. But taboos may provide other types of public benefit to a society. For example, a taboo against cannibalism would guarantee safety and the functioning of the society in case of a severe famine. Haidt et al. (1997) discuss the role of dietary restrictions as part of a society's health consideration. This role of dietary taboos is emphasized by the fact that many of the dietary taboos are contamination-sensitive. A dietary taboo, like kosher restrictions for Jewish people, has facilitated isolation and survival of the group culture (see Yuri Slezkine 2004). A taboo prohibiting a direct payment for human organs for transplanting may benefit a society by eliminating incentives for exploiting people and violent harvesting of human organs.

Taboos have an important aspect of social interaction. The strength of a taboo is affected by the percentage of individuals who deviate, or think about deviating, from the taboo (see Fessler and Navarrete 2003; for a similar argument with respect to social customs, see Akerlof 1980 and David Romer 1984). We do not specify the underlying social interaction process that establishes this relationship. It is possible that with some probability individuals' thoughts are transparent. Or that the strength of the taboo is determined by social interaction among individuals that may express their opinions and those that consider deviating from a taboo contribute to its weakening.

Summary / Questions / Reflection

Draw me a nice picture.