Controlling Social Risk: The Function and Effect of Societal Taboos in Regulatory Processes[1]

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Introduction

This working paper outlines the beginning of a new research project on societal taboos and how we make policy about that which we feel we cannot talk about. The project examines how we attempt to regulate and control social risk, specifically behavior perceived as deviant or dangerous, as well as encounters with "Others" perceived deviant through policy and the policy process.

I come at this project with an interest and background in policy-analysis, risk regulation and the ethics of accountability. Because of the nature of the topic, I have adopted a language of deconstruction and, as my choice of tools, utilize theories about culture and perception. This, of course, is not the only avenue for discourse, nor the only applicable set of theories. I do, however, believe this approach to be a useful first step towards shedding light on the social regulation of risk and our failures to effectively address protracted social problems.

Effective risk regulation, as Kahan et al (2006) have stated, poses a fundamental challenge to democracy. Even though public welfare often depends on effective risk regulation, rational responses to dangers "challenges democratic societies in a more fundamental way: *by threatening their [democratic societies'] commitment to genuinely deliberative policymaking*" (Kahan et al., 2006: 1071, my emphasis). Regulation of social risks, as this research will show, involves an even greater threat to our commitment to genuine deliberative policy making, through our conception and use of societal taboos.

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Controlling Social Risk

As a society humans we tend to divide risks into categories of voluntary and involuntary (Slovic, 2000: 127). As a rule, we generally accept the exposure to voluntary risk more readily than the exposure to involuntary risk. For instance, we seem to be okay with individuals being exposed to greater perceived voluntary risk - such as riding a motorcycle, smoking or scuba diving - than involuntary risk - such as exposure to nuclear power, earthquakes, or poisons in foods. By extension, we generally feel that, when it comes to involuntary risk, the regulatory aspects of our society should intervene to reduce perceived risks (Slovic, 2000: 128).

Social risks, as a matter of inconvenience, often transfer the risk taking of individuals - perceived as voluntary risk - to involuntary risk of others. In economic terms, these risks can be understood as the collective negative externalities of individual freedom and choice (e.g. Alemanno, den Butter, Nijsen, & Torriti, 2013). In socio-cultural terms they can be thought of as the majority culture or groups' negative experience with the actions or behaviors of members of society perceived as minority groups, outcasts, or deviant Others (e.g. Douglas, 1994, 2002; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009; Jenkins, 1998).

In the spirit of Sartre's (1989) "hell is other people,"[3] we try to control the risk taking of others to minimize our involuntary exposure to risk. Through regulatory governance we often require people who drive motorcycles to get a license and wear a helmet, we warn people who smoke of its deadly effects and outlaw smoking in public places, and we require people who wish to scuba dive to get a diving certificate to show that they know how to operate the equipment.[4]

Social risk in this paper is understood as individual or group behaviors and actions that are perceived by the majority as risky. Majority cultures often prescribe what is considered risky within a society or

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[3] "The line "Hell is other people" in French reads "L'enfer, c'est les autres" or "Hell is [the] others." (The best known English translation of the play, by Paul Bowles, actually renders the line "Hell is just – other people.") We get a little more of the flavor of the line in English if we read it as "Hell is the Other." That's closer to the point, I believe. Sartre says that the Other – that which is not ourselves – is, or can be, a source of our distress." Woodward, Kirk (July 9, 2010). "The Most Famous Thing Jean-Paul Sartre Never Said". *Rick on Theater*. Blogger (Google: blogspot.com). Retrieved January 8, 2010.

[4] These perceived risk individual behaviors and actions were identified by Slovic, Fischhoff and Lichtenstein (Fischhoff, Slovic, & Lichtenstein, 2000; Slovic, Fischhoff, & Lichtenstein, 2000).

community. As a rule, these would be behaviors or practices deemed socially or morally unacceptable. As a secondary category of social risk are those behaviors or practices that are considered dangerous, but socially and morally acceptable. The delineation between behavior and actions approved by the majority culture and those that fall outside of this accepted norm is the delineation – as perceived by the majority culture - between a respected citizen and an outcast or deviant Other.

When it comes to controlling other people's social risk-taking, or risky behavior and actions, we regulate these actions through a complex web of formal and informal institutions. Formal institutions include the policy process, laws, rules and regulations, as well as various enforcement agents operating on these formal rules. Informal institutions include agenda setting, gated communities, and audience behavior(Goffman, 1959), stigmatization (Goffman, 1963) and, last but not least, taboos.

Functions and Effects of Taboos

The understanding of risk in this study draws on psychological, social and cultural theories of risk.[5] Therefore, when examining social risk conceptualized as taboo, this study will address how taboos shape and are shaped by individual perceptions, social interests and cultural clusters. Taboos and perceptions of social risk are viewed as relative to individuals and collectives who operate in a socio-cultural context. Furthermore, the operation of taboos and the management of social risk have implications for, and are relevant to, policy-making and regulations, societal conflict management and resolution, as well as societal communication around risk.

Taboos are informal institutions used as tools use for regulation of social risk. The taboo concept indirectly inserts concepts of contamination, corruption, purity, danger and blame to a more traditional understanding of risk perception and risk regulation. By extension, taboos also add the complicating factors of silence, omission and fear of public debate to a regulatory process that requires democratic participation.

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[5] This places the study firmly on right side of Renn's (1992) systematic classification of risk perspectives, see Figure 3.1 on page 57.

Taboos are social-cultural cues and heuristics[6] with a strong prescriptive element of what not to do or what behavior not is acceptable for a member of the majority culture. Taboos serve a protective function (Radcliffe-Brown cited in Douglas, 2002: xii-xiii). They deliver a strong cultural judgment against actions or behaviors seen as potentially harmful to society. Inherent in this concept is that a taboo behavior poses a threat to the fabric, be it moral or social, that holds our society together, to that which makes us "us" - a distinct and honorable social group - or carries with it the potential to morally corrupt or physically damage large segments of society. As Douglas describes it; "[t]aboo is a spontaneous coding practice which sets up …spatial limits and physical and verbal signals to hedge around vulnerable relations. It threatens specific dangers if the code is not respected. Some of the dangers which follow on taboo-breaking spread harm indiscriminately on contact. Feared contagion extends the danger of a broken taboo to the whole community" (Douglas, 2002: xiii).

In general, we have a visceral reaction to both taboo topics and those perceived as engaging in taboo behavior or relationships. The emotional reaction to taboos is stronger and less reasoned than when people show poor form, break etiquette or even are obnoxious in our company. Taboos strike at something deeper, a learned fear about something we feel we cannot talk about. We feel we cannot discuss, argue with, scientifically investigate, or reason with a taboo topic (unless it is to support the taboo signifier of this type of behavior, relationship, or group of people). What is it that prompts this visceral reaction to taboos? And why are we unable to talk about them? Simply put, our reaction is visceral because we have been systematically taught through cultural upbringing to fear – at a very fundamental/core level – any behavior, relationship or group of people deemed outside the accepted norm. Taboos stem from either a moral or an emotional point of view (values transmitted through culture), not a rational or scientific point of view. As such, taboos cannot be debated – they are, by definition, inexcusable and irredeemable by their fundamental opposition to a morally held belief. Consequently, logic and discourse have no place in evaluating taboos - they must simply be taken on faith or as an ultimate/divine truth.

Why and how do taboos work in this modern day? Douglas states that "[t]aboos depend on a form of community-wide complicity. A community would not survive if its members were not committed to it;

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[6] Douglas at one point describes taboos as "a spontaneous device for protecting the distinctive categories of the universe. Taboo protects the local consensus on how the world is organized. It shores up wavering certainty. It reduces intellectual and social disorder" (Douglas, 2002: xi).

their concern shows in oblique warnings not to undermine its values. "Taken one by one, taboo beliefs seem so outlandish that it is difficult to see how a rational person could give them credence, which is why I refer to complicity. The people can believe because they collectively want to believe." (Douglas, 2002: xiii) Taboos and the people who abide by them are in a sort of mutually supportive collusion, which, Douglas (2002: xiii) points out, may go for all the things we choose to believe in. Direct admonitions (such as 'Pay respect to your father' or 'Do not commit incest') need and get "indirect support from a corresponding account of the universe. The implicit theory is that physical nature will avenge the broken taboos…from an armoury that will automatically defend the founding principles of society" (Douglas, 2002: xii). The human body is seen to work the same way; it will react negatively to right the wrong that has been introduced to it by the breaking of a taboo. In the implicit theory of taboos, the body will reject that which "unnatural".

As a result, taboos serve as a cultural worst-case-scenario in an otherwise fluid and relative social landscape.[7] Taboos, often set by the dominant culture or group in a society, are the rules that community members have to follow or risk the integrity and survival of the community. What is being protected through taboos is not only the larger community and the collective good from the potential harm of its individual members, but also the perseverance and domination of the cultural understandings, views and value judgment of the majority culture against minority groups or deviant perspectives. The potential break-down of a cohesive society, either by turning groups against each other, or through the elimination or contamination of fundamental principles, are the perceived harms that individuals are thought to provoke by engaging in taboo behavior.

The invisible, rapidly spreading and potentially irreversible disease concept is a potent part of the taboo structure. As an involuntary risk to the collective – often with perceived catastrophic effects -, the

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[7] This is in part why taboos work, even in a modern day rational society, because it reduces complexity, sets up safeguards around vulnerable relations and tells us what to do when we are faced with ambiguity, uncertainty and threat. Taboos "protect our primary distinctions of the universe" (Douglas, 2002: xi) in an ambiguous world and eases the discomfort we feel when faced with ambiguity. In a digital age we are not helped by more information as we face ambiguity. Uncertainty can be reduced by the addition of more information but ambiguity has an inherent valuation quality to that cannot be resolved through impartial information. "Ambiguous things can seem very threatening. Taboo confronts the ambiguous and shunts it into the category of the sacred" (Douglas, 2002: xi), or that which cannot be touched, the no-go zone.

taboo-as-moral-disease is a particularly threatening and powerful narrative. The heightened anxiety that comes with the perception of transmittable risk readily leads to "leakage" of fear and subsequent desires for control of other adjoining areas. For example, a fear of exposure to untreated mental illness in an uncontrolled environment can lead customers and store owners to prohibit any form of loitering by anyone in public spaces. Likewise, the fear of sexually predatory behavior toward children can lead child care institutions to hire only women and perceive men who are interested in the profession as suspect or deviant.

The question becomes, are taboos useful and, if so, what purpose do they serve? As black-and-white as the cultural defamation of taboo behavior is, the idea of what a taboo actually contains is often a gray and murky issue. Taboos aim at keeping something away from us, to clearly delineate what the culture and the dominant group will not and cannot accept. Therefore the behavior has to be identifiable, if not to some degree definable, in order to separate the undesirable behavior out and put people who transgress the social norm "over there" in a category of deviant, contagious and dangerous. Yet to keep a taboo behavior separate without addressing it in detail, results in tactics and policy that are blunt and ambiguous. Taboos, as tools of social risk regulation, need to be culturally strong enough to provoke the right behavior (or prevent wrong behavior), yet cannot be too precise because of the fear of moral contamination that the very act of defining it could potentially entail. As a result, the tension built into taboos stems, in part, from a simultaneous status as both black-and-white and gray. The resulting instability of the taboo narrative ultimately produces social regulatory tools that are both unstable and ineffective. Simply put, taboos carry within them the seeds of their own deconstruction.

A key consideration operating behind taboos – whether at an individual or risk regulation level – is the issue of language. Understanding behavior begins with observation and, in looking upon a subject, results in describing it and defining it through language. And while language reveals a lot about the observed object, it also reveals a great deal about the person or institution that is looking at the object. "Education is that process by which thought is opened out of the soul, and, associated with outward things, is reflected back upon itself, and thus made conscious of their reality and shape" (Bronson Alcott, cited in Nussbaum, 2010, p. 1) In the process of looking and learning we find out about ourselves, our thoughts and our values, whether we want it or not. As such, when we actually look at them or talk

about them, taboos become looking-glass selves[8] (Horton Cooley, 1902) and expanding Johari windows[9] (Luft and Ingham cited in López De Victoria, 2012), into ourselves and our culture. Taboos, as social risk regulation tools, thus can tell us a lot about our values, priorities, causal reasoning and risk culture. However, as a cultural sustainment tool taboos are not inviting of examination, questioning or learning. Their cultural function is; to be understood, respected and not talked about.

Additionally, language is power and, in the act of describing something, reveals power relationships. Phrasing shapes identities and creates imagery that impacts understanding and evokes emotions that influence judgments. Consequently, when we talk about something we see, our own power and the exertion of power becomes more personal. We start to see the agency in constructing and de-constructing ideas, in causal inferences and in the creation of identity. When we are forced to talk about something observed we become implicated in the act of exerting power over others, resulting in, to some extent, a personal connection with the observed. This violates one of the basic functions of taboos; to keep that which we dislike separate from us. Intimacy and familiarity brings risks we fear closer to us. Likewise, when we see our own power in the regulation of that risk it automatically brings us closer to the people we have wanted to keep separate from: the deviants, the Other. The fear of becoming contaminated by the social risks we exert power over, to become tainted by association with the people whose behavior we are trying to regulate, makes talking about taboo behavior a much more immediate and personal threat than we are willing to accept.

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[8] "In a very large and interesting class of cases the social reference takes the form of a somewhat definite imagination of how one's self--that is any idea he appropriates--appears in a particular mind, and the kind of self-feeling one has is determined by the attitude toward this attributed to that other mind. A social self of this sort might be called the reflected or looking glass self: 'Each to each a looking-glass Reflects the other that doth pass.' As we see our face, figure, and dress in the glass, and are interested in them because they are ours, and pleased or otherwise with them according as they do or do not answer to what we should like them to be; so in imagination we perceive in another's mind some thought of our appearance, manners, aims, deeds, character, friends, and so on, and are variously affected by it." (Horton Cooley, 1902)

[9] "The Johari Window helps you to categorize conscious and subconscious areas of your life. The window works much like a grid. It goes from the obvious and more conscious areas of your life to the less obvious areas that you may not be aware of. The Johari Window can be looked at from many angles and provides four basic forms of the Self (the Public, Private, Blind, and Undiscovered Self)." (López De Victoria, 2012)

Taboo as a blunt tool of social risk regulation, therefore, serves the multiple purposes of distancing ourselves from what we fear, obfuscating the power we exert in trying to regulate taboo behavior, and muting and dehumanizing the individuals whose lives are deeply affected by regulation. In a very real sense we create the taboos that rule our society, even to the point of creating a supporting story about how the world works. We argue that the values and the power exertion, inherent in taboos and based on self, are natural or divine. Making a behavior, an action or person taboo, makes that something or someone an unspeakable and an unthinkable; thereby effectively preventing any public discourse, any alternative analysis or criticism of the standing culture and power order. We choose to believe and support our own taboos, because they save us from having to analyze ambiguous risk, from being uncomfortable in the presence of what we do not understand, and they protect us from calling into question the values that glue the majority culture together and the way that majority leaders maintain that glue.

Empirical Research

Empirically this work seeks to examine policy and regulation in the US around taboos such as socio-economic inequality/class [economic policy], suicide [mental health policy], incest [family/social policy], and homelessness [housing/social policy].

Frameworks and Methods for Analysis

Conceptual framework:

Uncovering protracted social problems as social risks managed through taboos

Perceptions of social risks in a cultural context

Managing direct Interactions with taboo people and behaviors

Managing taboos in regulation and the policy process

∗ Historical-institutionalism/case studies of societal taboos:

Process tracing of societal taboos in the US policy-making and the policy process

Timeframe: 1970-present

Taboos: socio-economic class [economic policy], suicide [mental health policy], incest [family/social policy], and homelessness [housing/social policy]

Formal institutions: in the policy process, laws, rules and regulations, as well as various enforcement agents and adjudicating bodies

Informal institutions: agenda setting, gated communities, audience behavior, stigmatization, blaming the victim, silence

∗ Power analysis:

Three aspects of power (Lukes, 2004) in policy making; direct power, indirect power and subversive power

Analyze the use of direct, indirect and subversive power by actors that upholds/maintains taboos in policy-making and the policy-process

∗ Risk analysis:

Explaining the roles, functions and effects of societal taboos in contemporary US society generally and in US policy-making in particular

∗ Ethical analysis:

Implications of these roles, functions and effects of societal taboos on citizenship, participation and the functional parameters of American democracy

Implications of the use of power (3 dimensions) for effectiveness, adequacy, appropriateness, equity in the policy process

Implications of the functions and effects of societal taboos and the use of power with regard to taboos for our ability to solve protracted social problems

Implications of the functions and effects of societal taboos and the use of power with regard to taboos on ethical integrity of American democracy (interpreted as its treatment of those worst off)

Why Should We Care? Why does it Matter?

Policy making, whether addressing voluntary or involuntary risk, involves the authoritative allocation of societal resources and values. By controlling social risk through policy, governing institutions attempt to direct collective, or majority, power toward the establishment or reinforcement of collective good. That which is defined as "collective good" is, however, established by the majority culture. As a result, those perceived as the deviant Other, through the narrative of taboo, are kept out of both the public discourse and the public policy processes that, ironically, will determine important aspects, if not all, of their lives within the community. Deviant Others, through the stigmatization of taboo, effectively loose their status as citizens. Individuals and groups lose their rights, their voice and their ability to effectively participate in the democratic process.

At a theoretical level, the collective assertion of power to control social risk is often both warranted and necessary.[10] That said, how we deal with social risk, through formal and informal narratives such as taboos, has important democratic implications. The fundamental nature of a taboo makes it impossible to directly talk about the behavior or action or, by extension, its social and policy implications. The unintended consequence of such informal risk regulation, is the silencing of victims along with the offenders. The same kinds of discrimination and exclusion that deviant Others face, the persons directly affected by or related to deviant Others, also become invisible, muted and prevented from participating in public discourse and policy making. Finally, the function and effect of taboos also make it less likely that we will find effective solutions or remedies to the real and protracted social problems associated with risky social behaviors and actions.[11]

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[10] I am not, in spite of indications otherwise, constructing an argument here for greater public empathy for child molesters or more input from Neo-Nazi groups on social policy.

[11] There are also ethical implications in researching and writing about the social construction of risk and how it is being managed, or not managed, by the administrative state as Pidgeon et al (2008) have pointed out.

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