People Can Savage Social Norms, but Also Revive Them

Individuals can change the way we see.

By David Brooks
Opinion Columnist

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When Cass Sunstein was a young law professor, he happened to come across an older male professor talking to a young female student in a hallway. To Sunstein’s astonishment, the professor was stroking the student’s hair.

Sunstein later went up to her and said: “That was completely inappropriate. He shouldn’t have done that.” The student brushed him off: “It’s fine. He’s an old man. It’s really not a problem.”

Thirty minutes later the same student appeared in his office, in tears. “He does that all the time,” she cried out. “It’s horrible. My boyfriend thinks I should make a formal complaint, but I don’t want to do that. … I don’t want to make a fuss.”

In his new book, “How Change Happens,” Sunstein uses this story to make a few points. First, sometimes people’s private reactions differ from how society tells them they’re supposed to react to a given situation. Second, if you give people permission to express how they really feel, they will sometimes take you up on it. Third, if there is mass dissonance between how people feel they’re supposed to act and their actual feelings, then you’ve got a situation ripe for radical and sudden social change.

Sunstein’s book is illuminating because it puts norms at the center of how we think about change. A culture is made up of norms — simple rules that govern what thoughts, emotions and behaviors are appropriate at what moment. It’s appropriate to be appalled when people hit their dogs. It’s inappropriate to ask strangers to tell you their income.
Most norms are invisible most of the time. They’re just the water in which we swim. We unconsciously absorb them by imitating those around us. We implicitly know that if we violate a norm, there will be a social cost, maybe even ostracism.

From time to time, a norm stops working or comes into dispute. People are slow to challenge a broad norm, because they don’t want to say anything that might make them unpopular. But eventually some people notice that, actually, there are a lot of people who secretly think a certain norm is wrong or outdated.

When this happens, permission is granted to go public with your private thoughts. More and more people speak up and you get rapid, cascading change. There used to be a social penalty for supporting gay marriage. Now there’s a social penalty for not supporting it.

Sunstein points to the importance of “norm entrepreneurs,” people who challenge old norms and create new ones. I’d add that there are at least five different kinds of norm-shifters, though often one person can perform several of these roles:

**Namers.** These are people who describe the context in some new way. They describe the reality around us in a way that makes visible what had previously been invisible or taken for granted. Charles Dickens made the poor visible to Victorian England.

**Confrontationalists.** Social movements move forward by declaring disgraceful things that had formerly been acceptable: segregation, littering, sexual harassment, etc. They wake people up to the ways an old norm is disgraceful by actively and visibly confronting it. The civil rights movement had a strategy aimed at creating a soap opera every day: Do something every day that forces the segregationists to display their own hatefulness and the unjustness of their norms. This is how you rouse people.

**Illuminators.** If confrontationalists tear down old norms, illuminators lift up new ones. They do this by showing how cool and just the norm breakers are and thus encourage others to copy them. The 1960s radicals violated all sorts of norms, but it was illuminators like Ken Kesey, Bob Dylan and Janis Joplin who created the counterculture identity: This is who we are. This is the story we are all a part of. This is how we behave.

**Conveners.** These are people who organize gatherings for those who want to shift the same norm. These gatherings embolden change agents by reminding them, “There are a lot of us!” They sponsor specific actions you can do to embody new norms. Everybody should recycle.

**Celebrities.** When famous, good-looking or cool people embrace a norm-shift, you get a mass cascade. That’s when you win over all the people who may not be intrinsically interested in the cause, they just know that this is how the cool people think and act, so they want to do it, too.
We're living in a moment when norms are in maximum flux. Donald Trump has smashed through hundreds of our established norms and given people permission to say things that were unsayable just a decade ago. Especially in politics, the old rules of decorous behavior no longer apply.

But we all have the power to create cultural microclimates around us, through the way we act and communicate. When a small group of people shift the way they show approval and disapproval, it can shift the social currents among wider and wider circles. Suddenly, revolutions. The whole school of fish has shifted course in rapid ways that would have astounded us beforehand.

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David Brooks has been a columnist with The Times since 2003. He is the author of “The Road to Character” and the forthcoming book, “The Second Mountain.” @nytdavidbrooks

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