

LEGITIMACY IN COOPERATIVE HUMAN SYSTEMS DESIGN: MEDIATING POWER, STRUCTURE, AND MOTIVATIONAL MISALIGNMENT

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ABSTRACT

Substantial work in psychology and economics suggests that interventions with predictable effects on material interests interact with other motivations so that the effect on action is the opposite of the desired effect. In economics this has mostly been described under the umbrella term of motivation crowding out. The mechanism is not market failure, information shortfall, or failed rationality, but motivational profiles with discrete arguments, several of which may be affected by given interventions, with opposite effects for behavior. One can think of an informal model of material, moral, social, and emotional vectors as discrete arguments in a utility function, with a magnitude and a valence, and describe the mechanisms shown to date for negative interaction effects among these arguments. The core insight is that various ways of acting on material motivations can backfire because they will misalign the material motivations with emotional responses, moral commitments, or social signals or dynamics that would lead to a behavior different from the behavior desired by an intervention focused on getting the material incentives alone right.

A core design challenge for cooperative human systems, therefore, is how to allow for certain kinds of structure, that involve the application of power by some participants or organizers on other participants, such that that power will not lead to motivation misalignment. The cleanest example is in experimental public goods games, where the application of punishment by some participants against others can lead to either near-full cooperation, or to unravelling and lack of cooperation, depending on context. The question is how to enable, in that case, punishment, in a form that will lead to positive alignment between material motivations (avoiding punishment) and other vectors (e.g., emotional) to achieve the desired outcome. Law has approached this problem by deploying various institutional, rhetorical, and organizational mechanism to negate the motivational misalignment that the sanction

element of law could cause. New observational work on Wikipedia suggests that similar elements are developing in that large cooperative community to achieve legitimacy, and through it mediate the risk of motivational misalignment and, with it, loss of volunteers to the common effort.

The promise of peer production has long been its relative superiority over more traditional, hierarchical models of organization at collecting and processing information and insight from a diverse set of sources, using a diverse set of knowledge, insight, and creative resources. The difficulties associated with peer production arise from its very decentralized and diverse nature—a risk of lack of focus, a relative lack of navigability and directed effort. Structure—a regulatory in patterns of behavior, process, and outcome; and power—the capacity of some people to act on others so as to shape their behavior or outcomes—is an important dimension of structure. It allows some people to navigate a cooperative effort toward a share goal; it enables increased effectiveness. That is what makes hierarchies work, when they do. The challenge is how to layer power and structure over decentralized networks in a way that does not undermine the very advantages of peer production to begin with. Parts of this challenge deal with how to avoid loss of information or diversity of perspective. This presentation is focused on a different aspect of the problem: how to layer structure and power without loss of motivation to participate.