

## **Micro Social Engineering: Introduction of a New Business Concept and its Review from a Multidisciplinary Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

*In this article, the authors introduce a new business practice named micro social engineering and analyze it from a multidisciplinary perspective including business, sociology, philosophy, and education. The thoughts and theories of leading philosophers and social scientists are provided to the reader to shed light on the emerging concept. The authors, at the end, contend that the concept of micro social engineering is an unethical practice led by neoliberal market ideology and that micro social engineering practices are not only economically ineffective but also corruptive to the morals of the individual and society at large.*

### **1. Introduction: Social Engineering and Related Terms**

It cannot be denied that the human being is living under the strong influence exercised by powerful institutions such as governments and religions, and these hegemonic parties construct societies to reach their own personal and institutional goals. A well-organized way of constructing culture, social engineering has been implemented by a few bullies throughout the history to secure authority over the public. The radio and the film industry were turned into effective propaganda tools by fascist regimes (Kroen, 2004, p. 727) such as the Nazis who tried to create a pure German nation free of diversified races and religions. As Herman and Chomsky (1988, p. 306) states, the mass media is consistently used to conduct a system-supportive propaganda for benefits, and the consent is manufactured, creating an illusionary ambiance for public to accord with what is propagated.

Social engineering has not always been deemed negative by experts, though. While Max Weber considered a sociologist an academic who detaches herself from any kind of mission for social change in society (Sijuwade, 2011, p. 5), the founder of the discipline of sociology, Auguste Comte, deemed sociology more than an intellectual enterprise. He dreamed of an ideal society fine-tuned by sociologists who would use their expertise to cure society's ills (Langley, 1988, p.14). The word paternalism, which is as highly controversial as social engineering, was popularized in the late nineteenth century with Mill's (1859:2002) famous work *On Liberty*, and the term referred to more or less hierarchical relationships, such as that between king and subject, and master and slave (Chadwick, 2011). Sunstein and Thaler (2003, p.3) classify a policy as paternalistic if it attempts to steer people's choices in a way that will make choosers better off, and Dworkin (1972) similarly defines the term as 'interference with a person's liberty of action justified by reasons referring exclusively to the welfare, good, happiness, needs, interests or values of the person coerced' (Gibbon, Daviron, & Barral, 2014, p. 168). Economists of liberal persuasion, on the other hand, oppose paternalism and tend to praise normative individualism (Hausman & McPherson, 2008, pp. 237-238) that advocates leaving individuals free to act as they wish.

Social engineering and its main language, paternalism, are used not only in state governance. According to Williams (2005, p. 185), '...in the last [seventy] years, and now, at an increasing rate, [corporations] have passed the frontier of the selling of goods and services and has become involved with the teaching of social and personal values...' While social science has mainly conducted empirical observation and avoided any intrusion for social change, the business management has chosen a very different path to acquire economic/personal benefits. Money has indeed come into a very powerful position in our era.

Georg Simmel thinks that all money relations in modern times, including prostitution, can be classified as business transactions (Dörr-Backes & Nieder, 1995, p. 155). Yet again, according to Simmel (1997, p. 264) a piece of respect for humanity may be lost in such transactions. The wholeness and freedom of the human is sold in exchange for materialistic values to acquire hedonistic pleasures and power of having, consequently creating an asymmetrical power relationship between the exchanging parties. Another term, Corporatocracy, is defined as the alignment of government and corporate interests to acquire mutual benefits, representing a system that all the actions of businesses are pardonable as long as they work for business owners. Businesses of our time seem to thrive in such lucrative environment free of regulations and limitations imposed by governments.

## **2. Introduction and Definition of Micro Social Engineering**

In the age of economic neoliberalism, some companies and their sidekicks, advertisers, have started following unethical methods to shape consumers' and employees' value systems to acquire more profit and power, proving Mann (1986) to be right in claiming that money can be used as a despotic power. As Thaler and Sunstein (2008) state, 'choice architects' have all the instruments to manipulate the buying behavior.

Interesting news from different parts of the world lately appears on mass and social media. For instance, a French café in the Riviera city of Nice has come up with a set of interesting offers (MacGuill, 2013, December 10). When the customer wants 'a coffee', she has to pay €7 (€represents for the EU currency Euro), 'a coffee please' is sold at €4.25. And the most affordable option is 'Hello, a coffee please', costing the customer only €1.40. While the owner of the shop conceives of his offer as a way of helping people feel more relaxed, is it really so? Or is it simply a way of punishing the customers who do not behave in respect to the owner's expectations? And is this strategy applicable to all consumers whose upbringing is diverse? Upon searching for meaningful answers to these questions, the authors find three problems with such business activity. Firstly, the customer who resists to saying 'My Honor, could I please get a coffee?' is punished with affording extra costs for the same coffee, compared to a customer who chooses to do so. This is a clear case of inequality among customers, also creating an irrational power relationship between the company and the customer with a limited budget.

Secondly, if the obeying customer is doing so just to get a more economical coffee, her action conflicts the school of deontological ethics and healthy moral development, forcing the customer to become dubious for acquiring economic benefits. Kohlberg (1984) presents a detailed model in his prominent work, *The Psychology of Moral Development*, stating that people go through three main levels in life. A member of the first and least developed level carries out an action just to avoid punishment and to acquire personal benefits. Her main questions would be 'Does this action harm me?' and 'What's in it for me?' in the process of giving a decision. At the later stages of moral development, the individual acts according to social norms, law, and finally universally ethical principles. Given that, it can be clearly said that the bribed customer is 'encouraged' to be nice by using the instruments of the pre-conventional level. Furthermore, the customer could start behaving rude or prefer another brand when the economic motivator is removed, proving that the strategy is also economically unstable. Thirdly, if the customer intentionally becomes 'more' polite as required, she changes her behavior for exchange of materialist values. According to Belk (1985), worldly possessions are the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction for the materialist, probably resulting in egoism and unhappiness in her life.

Another micro social engineering practice is that some companies lately use the concept of spirituality by making their employees adopt spiritual ethics for maximum efficiency at the workplace (Basci, 2015, p. 447). Yet, are these employees willing to live and work according to spiritual teachings pushed by top management? Étienne de La Boétie tells something important about the habit of serving that leads to losing sight of the very condition of servitude (Lordon, 2014, p. 5):...It is not that people 'forget' the unhappiness caused by servitude; but they endure its misfortunes as a destiny over which they have no choice, or even simply as a way of life to which one eventually becomes accustomed...meaning that servitude could become an obligation dictated by the employer or an illusion of the employment 'structure'.

Micro social engineering is also carried out on ethnocentric level with the aid of globalism. Latent ethnocentrism is conveyed by—specifically—western fashion brands, as if their aesthetic taste were better than any others'. We frequently hear about Italian superiority of design and how great French fashion is, but what makes them distinguished? Are their excellence scientifically proven or are these clichés simply a consequence of a cultural system led by western nation states and their powerful brands?

Another striking example is a Colorado baker with evangelical Protestant faith refusing to bake a wedding cake for a gay couple just because he believes same-sex marriage is wrong (Paulson, 2014, December 15). Can his faith be excused and should he be allowed to discriminate against 'inappropriate' customers who are not 'worthy' being serviced?

Micro social engineering seems to happen not only from business to customer, but also from customer to customer in an indirect way. For example, the Arab customer visiting Turkey insists not to buy goods and services from shops that sell alcohol since alcohol consumption is seen as a fundamental sin forbidden by Islam. The shop owner, therefore, halts selling alcohol in his shop to have his share from thick wallets. While this activity benefits the shop owner and the Arab customer, it causes the secular customer not to be able to buy alcohol from that specific shop. This consequence driven by hegemonic economic power comes into play and destroys the 'shopping right' of the secular customer at the end.

To sum up, micro social engineering could be defined as companies' and consumers' endeavor to influence and shape the values and limit the preferences of consumers and employees through unethical ways such as asymmetrical power relationship, cultural imperialism, discrimination and bribery to obtain economic and personal benefits. It may be considered a consequence of neo-capitalism, classifying as an extreme and undercover form of psychological violence.

To make this new phenomenon clearer, the authors would like to show the analogy between macro and micro social engineering by using a metaphor. What Adolph Hitler was during the Second World War are today's gorilla corporations, which aim to design the everyday life in respect to their benefits. Current mass media propagating continuous and deceptive promotion apparently shows a strong resemblance to Goebbels, Hitler's PR guy. And as the German nationalists of the Second World War supported Hitler's actions wholeheartedly, the proponents of neoliberalism claim that companies set the rules of free market, and these rules should be obeyed with no dispute. To elucidate the comparison between micro and macro social engineering in a more concrete way, the authors are to present the table below.

**Table: Comparison of Micro Social Engineering to Macro Social Engineering**

	<b>Main Activity</b>	<b>Thrives in</b>	<b>Fundamental Tools</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>Macro Social Engineering</b>	Constructing society	Fascism Dictatorship	Paternalism, Propaganda	Planning, organizing and implementing a monoculture program by the state government, etc.
<b>Micro Social Engineering</b>	Constructing consumers	Globalism Neo-capitalism Corporatocracy	Advertisement, Lobbying, Paternalism	Ethnocentric communication, bribing customers, discriminating against particular customer segments, handling employee management by a monocultural set of values, customer domination over other customers, etc.

### **3. Discussion: Critique of Micro Social Engineering**

The evolution of business and marketing management, ideally, demands that the customer/staff be put in the very core of all business activities. The production and selling philosophy of the past that aimed to manufacture and sell whatever the management finds meaningful is supposed to have evolved to *sustainable marketing*. The essence of sustainable marketing requires that all components of society and business partners be treated nicely and ethically and that their well-being be secured (Kotler & Armstrong, 2012, pp. 607-608). Yet, what has really happened within the last 20 years is that the 'customer is the king' philosophy has transformed into a 'you will obey what I say' mentality.

This shift also proves Weber's (1922:1978, pp. 24-25) inferences about rationality to be true. Max Weber distinguishes the types of rationality mainly as formal rationality (or instrumental rationality) and substantive rationality (or value rationality) in his widely-known book named *Economy and Society*.

Formal rationality became quite problematic in modern society since monetary and other powerful hegemonic desires make it difficult for companies to care for moral values and not to interfere with the natural flow of social action.

In addition to Weber's observations about modernity, Kant's (1998) reciprocity thesis seems to be criticizing the current actions of companies. According to Immanuel Kant, a free will means a will that is not influenced by external forces. Thus, freedom should be morally self-legislating, and companies should allow consumers to make their choices themselves without any coercion. Kant also calls down the utilitarian or consequentialist side of ethics, which states that a person's act is morally right if it produces happiness and satisfaction for the self regardless of whatever it causes for others (Lyons, 1965, p. 7; McElwee, 2010, p. 395). Following Kant, Kohlberg (1973, p. 636) believed that morality should be carried out with autonomous free will, and argued that higher stages of morality offer healthier solutions to moral problems since they better satisfy the universal criteria of justice.

All in all, some philosophers and social scientists seem to be in agreement with the notion that micro social engineering limits people's freedom of choice, and micro social engineering practices could serve negative consequences in terms of both moral values and economic efficiency. As Noam Chomsky states in his book named *Hopes and Prospects*, the very design of neoliberal principles is a direct attack on democracy.

#### 4. Future Research

Given the fact that Eastern societies, including Turkey, are supposed to be accustomed to high power distance and paternalistic values, it would be an interesting research topic to compare a few Eastern and Western consumer markets in terms of their reaction to micro social engineering. This comparison could be carried out on the business side as well. The thoughts of managers with different cultural backgrounds may be examined through in-depth interviews. The new phenomenon of micro social engineering also looks very eligible for action research, allowing researchers to design retail environments that would help observe consumers' reaction to micro social engineering techniques. All in all, this brand-new phenomenon deserves to be regarded as a new and rich research area that will help researchers disclose the latent effects of dominant neo-capitalistic values in our age.

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