

UNITED WISDOM

The Invisible Advantages of a Familiar Norm

Relationships and Intimacy

Andrey Zarinsh & Maria Evilkut

R-28-N04 · EN

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

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Epigraph

> *we eagerly accept the new*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Human Work, III, pp. 38–41. A short fragment concerning technical change. The author compares attitudes towards it with the preservation of social ideas, rather than describing everyone through one formula.

What this article is about

A small group discusses a book every Friday. The reading is announced two days beforehand, conversation moves quickly, and the evening ends with dinner at the same restaurant. Several regular participants find the arrangement so convenient that it seems simply normal. A newcomer first has to discover unwritten rules, obtain the book, rearrange the evening, and work out how to decline dinner without disappearing from the conversation. Only the last part of that journey is visible at the meeting.

A familiar norm can confer an advantage without a separate gift. It already fits someone's schedule, language, experience, and way of participating. This fit saves preparatory work that others undertake before they can act on equal terms in the situation itself. Advantage becomes invisible when convenience is treated as a neutral property of the arrangement, while additional effort is treated entirely as the newcomer's personal characteristic.

The article considers this mechanism without allocating blame by group membership. We do not infer intentions, declare every shared norm unjust, or assume identical consequences for everyone. We ask which assumptions a familiar arrangement contains, who can leave them unnoticed, and what remains outside the visible action. This question allows a specific norm to be examined while preserving its useful function and participants' dignity.

I. Normal often means familiar to the observer

Normal can combine several meanings: something happens frequently, it is familiar to me, it is permissible, or it ought to happen this way. The movement between them can be unnoticed. A frequently used method becomes expected; departure from it then begins to look mistaken. Yet frequency does not establish necessity. Clarify which meaning is operating: a description of habit, a task requirement, or a judgement of someone acting differently.

@andrey.zarinsh @ilkutki

A regular book-group participant knows when interruption is acceptable, how long an answer should be, and whether reading the entire book is expected. They no longer remember learning this. A newcomer has to discover the rules while participating, sometimes making mistakes. The regular may treat their confidence as a natural quality of any prepared person. The learned arrangement then disappears from the explanation while another's difficulty remains visible as apparently personal inadequacy.

This does not mean someone deliberately created each habit to obtain an advantage. A format may have developed by chance after several convenient meetings and then continued. Origins and consequences are different questions. A benevolent account of how something began does not establish convenience for each subsequent participant. Nor does discovering different consequences establish malicious intent among those whom the arrangement suits.

Familiarity creates a particular viewpoint: I see the meeting, but scarcely see the route into it. The journey from announcement to participation can be short for one person and long for another. If observation begins inside the room, preparatory work drops out of the picture. Move the story's beginning back occasionally: when and how did someone hear about the meeting, what needed clarification, and which choices had to be made beforehand?

This shift does not deliver a final moral verdict. It changes the subject of attention. Instead of asking generally why someone participates without enough ease, ask which part of the arrangement remains unfamiliar or requires additional preparation. The answer may concern experience, scheduling, money, language, or a different goal. These circumstances need distinguishing rather than replacement with one explanation about an unsuitable personality or a bad group.

II. Preparatory work may be unevenly distributed

At the meeting, everyone receives the same time to answer. Beforehand, however, one person merely opened a familiar application while another had to discover where the material was, obtain access, and learn the format. Equal final speaking time does not describe the entire route. Our question concerns work generated by familiar organisation and why it remained unseen, rather than the overall size of people's starting resources.

Preparation can involve information: understanding abbreviations, finding rules, or distinguishing requirements from options. It can involve coordination: rearranging tasks, agreeing a time, or explaining an absence beforehand. It may include locating material or asking which response method is acceptable. Such work is not necessarily unjust; new activities inevitably require learning. But ask whether a difficulty belongs to the subject matter or to an arrangement that could be made clearer.

A familiar participant's advantage sometimes lies in not needing to ask. They know the route and do not risk looking out of place by clarifying the obvious. A newcomer faces both an information problem and the question of whether it may be voiced. Calm explanation reduces part of that work. A surprised response can preserve an unknown rule alongside an additional obligation to conceal the fact that it is unknown.

Silence should not automatically confirm convenience. Someone may have prepared independently, declined part of the activity, or decided against discussing a difficulty. We cannot guess which occurred. We can provide a clear way to ask and consider the response actually received. That is more useful than assuming that an absence of complaints means everyone's preparatory costs are equal or nonexistent.

Preparation also need not earn admiration solely because it is difficult. Some work can be removed without sacrificing meaning: announcing a book earlier, explaining the format, or separating dinner from required participation. Less unnecessary work does not make an event less serious. It allows effort to go into discussing the book instead of deciphering entry conditions. What is unnecessary depends on the goal and facts, not on dismissing all rules generally.

III. A shared format assumes a participant

Every arrangement contains an image of its user. An announcement assumes access to a channel; an evening assumes availability; rapid discussion assumes a suitable way to join without preparing an answer. These may be reasonable assumptions for part of a group. Difficulty begins when they remain unnamed and are considered equally available to everyone. An absent participant then disappears before being able to report the obstacle.

The imagined participant need not appear in a document. They emerge through small decisions: how much time is given, what seems obvious, and which questions sound strange. Sometimes one new person makes an assumption visible. Their presence should not become an accusatory symbol. They may simply want to learn the procedure rather than represent everyone whose circumstances differ from the familiar format.

Assumptions can be examined without searching for a hidden motive. Which channel is used? What must be obtained beforehand? Who knows its rules? How are changes announced? These concern the event's organisation. Answers may show an assumption is necessary, reveal an alternative, or identify resource limitations. Each creates a subject more precise than a general demand for someone to become more open-minded.

Sometimes the assumed participant is described through a moral quality. An interested person will attend in the evening; a serious person asks no basic questions; a friendly person stays for dinner. An organisational choice becomes a character test. Interest can take another form,

however, and refusing dinner may have reasons unrelated to feelings about the group. Examine an action rather than infer an entire personality from its fit with one arrangement.

A shared norm becomes more candid when assumptions are named. For example, discussion requires reading particular material beforehand; dinner is optional; questions about the format may be sent in advance. This does not ensure participation for everyone or remove every limitation. It does let someone compare their possibilities with actual requirements rather than guess which hidden conditions must be fulfilled for their presence to count as sufficiently normal.

IV. A new object and an unchanged idea

In Human Work, Gilman contrasts readiness for technical novelty with the persistence of social ideas. This is early twentieth-century social criticism, not a contemporary measurement of the brain. The book contains racial and biological generalisations that we exclude as scientific or moral foundations. We use only a limited contrast between changing a method and retaining a familiar conception. Gilman, III, pp. 38–41.

In our own situation, a meeting application can change while assumptions about who has time to answer remain. A beautiful new announcement may retain obscure abbreviations. Outward novelty does not establish a changed logic of participation. After updating a tool, ask separately which image of a normal participant remains inside the process. Has convenience increased only for those already comfortable, or has another checked route appeared?

This question does not oppose technology to relationships. A tool can make a substantial difference when it addresses an actual obstacle. Its presence alone does not establish how people use it or what they expect of one another. Software may allow several response methods while a group recognises only the quickest spoken answer as adequate. The limitation then concerns evaluation of participation as well as a button's design.

The unchanged conception can become visible in responses to an exception. A new option is formally offered, yet anyone using it must justify themselves again. A route exists technically and remains socially strange. There is no need to immediately declare everyone hypocritical. Name the inconsistency: if the method is permitted and fits the task, why does using it require additional defence? The answer clarifies both rules and expectations.

The historical text does not prove an unchanging human nature. It supplies a question to examine in our own example. A retained habit does not establish that change is impossible; a helpful update does not establish that all differences have disappeared. A boundary preserves accuracy: comparison directs attention, while conclusions about a specific norm need observation of its operation and responses from participants.

V. Habit is not confined to an inner world

At the beginning of Part I of Human Nature and Conduct, John Dewey considers habit through interaction between a person and an environment. This is a philosophical framework, not our diagnosis of a group. It helps keep an arrangement from being described solely as private attitudes: materials, repeated actions, and others' responses sustain it. Dewey, Part I, § I, pp. 14–17.

If a familiar format requires a free Friday evening, goodwill alone will not make participation easier. Consider timing and ways of joining. If procedural questions habitually meet a joke, announcing hospitality may leave that response intact. This is our application of Dewey's framework to an authored example. It does not establish that environments fully determine every action or remove personal responsibility.

The practical value lies in locating a change. Instead of requiring everyone to become more sensitive, explain one unwritten procedure or alter one response to a question. Inner attention remains important but gains an action. Conversely, changing a schedule without discussing expectations may be insufficient. Person and environment meet in a repeated situation; examining that meeting is more useful than selecting its sole cause beforehand.

A habit need not be harmful. It reduces constant renegotiation, saves time, and makes shared activity predictable. The question is not abolishing all continuity. Identify which part serves a needed function and which generates unnecessary preparation. A meeting that starts on time can help participants plan; a location announced at the last minute distributes predictability differently.

Examining a habit should therefore preserve what is useful. Retain the goal and shared rhythm while clarifying conditions or opening another route to substantive participation. This cannot be promised to remove every injustice. A particular result can nevertheless be established: someone hears earlier, understands the format, and can decide whether it suits them. The result is limited but meaningful because it changes actual preparation.

VI. Seeing advantage without guessing a life

Begin with your own route. What do I know without searching? Which abbreviations do I immediately understand? Which parts of my schedule can change? What do I already have before the announcement? This describes convenience rather than guilt. Distinguish facts from assumptions: I obtained material in one click; I assume others did too. The latter needs checking and may prove incorrect.

Next, ask about the process without requesting a full biography. What needed clarification? Was obtaining material possible? Was the arrangement understandable? These questions

concern the event. Someone may respond briefly, decline discussion, or name a requirement without explaining its origins. Acknowledging possible advantage does not authorise investigating another person's finances, health, or relationships to produce a complete moral map of a group.

Repeated requests can matter, but explanations need care. If several participants ask for the location, perhaps the notice is unclear. That hypothesis can be checked through a correction and feedback. It does not prove inattentiveness or deliberate concealment by an organiser. Separating observation from explanation helps address a small problem without making it a dispute about everyone's true nature.

Information about advantage may remain incomplete. Not everyone describes preparation, and one account represents only that account. The map stays limited. Change a clear part, name unknowns, and avoid promising a universal result. Modest conclusions need not mean inaction. They help choose an action fitting the facts while leaving it revisable if another response reveals a differently organised difficulty.

Observation should not create more work for people already preparing extensively. A regular participant can assemble clear instructions or check an announcement themselves. They need not wait for a newcomer to prove the necessity of every explanation. Invite consultation where needed and accept refusal. Recognising advantage includes noticing who currently has the capacity to undertake some work of examining it.

VII. Objecting to a format is not attacking its people

Proposing a change can sound like accusing a whole group. An organiser invested time, participants enjoyed good meetings, and a comment seems to reject that contribution. Valuable experience and a format's limitation can coexist. Someone may appreciate the discussion and ask for earlier notice. Proving gratitude beforehand should not be a condition of considering a specific norm.

Preserve the subject when responding. Needing earlier notice is different from declaring bad organisation in general. Being accustomed to a venue does not establish that another is impossible. Clarifying goals, conditions, and alternatives keeps an organisational question from becoming a general dispute about goodness. If criticism itself humiliates someone personally, that can be named without cancelling the substantive question about the arrangement.

Advantage does not imply equal guilt among everyone whom a norm suits. One person lacked information about an obstacle, another could not change the process, and another insisted on an unsuitable option. These differ. New information creates new available decisions, but naming an advantage cannot establish a past motive. Responsibility is better related to a specific role, action, and what someone could examine and do.

Discussion also has limits. A group need not fulfil every request, particularly one changing its central purpose or exceeding capacity. Explain a refusal concretely: which condition is required, why, and what alternatives exist. Someone can then assess the decision and choose whether to continue participating. Calling the applicant insufficiently serious conceals a limitation while adding an unnecessary personal judgement.

A small trial can also support relationships. An entire community need not be rebuilt when a comment concerns the timing of announcements. Agree to check one method and ask what happened. The attempt does not guarantee agreement. It moves a dispute about normality into observable action, where usefulness and limitations can be discussed more precisely than supposed intentions.

VIII. Advantage can change with a situation

Someone comfortable in a book group may become uncertain elsewhere, facing an unfamiliar language, procedure, and deadlines. This does not cancel the earlier advantage or show advantages nonexistent. It shows their specificity: fit with one norm is not a permanent property of the whole person. Discuss actual conditions rather than turning someone into an unchanging category of convenience or difficulty.

This distinction resists dividing people simply into those always advantaged and those always deprived. Persistent inequality may exist, but one local situation does not describe an entire social biography. We cannot derive it from how quickly someone answered at a meeting. Name a particular fit with the norm, and investigate wider circumstances separately where the task and sufficient information warrant it.

Changing positions may reveal preparation previously unnoticed. Still, personal difficulty is not final knowledge of someone else's experience. One lost instruction is not years of exclusion; a brief inconvenience does not describe a life. Experience may make a question more attentive, but its answer still belongs to the person and particular facts. Sympathy does not replace distinctions of scale, conditions, and possible consequences.

Use a change of position as a thought experiment. What would I not know on a first visit? Where would I need to ask? What seems obvious because I know this group? These questions do not create a reliable model of every newcomer. They identify assumptions for further examination. Imagination begins an inquiry usefully when it is not presented as testimony already received from other participants.

Specific advantage also allows specific appreciation. A suitable arrangement can be valued without declaring it equally useful to everyone. Familiarity can ease participation without devaluing preparation for the subject matter. These kinds of work differ. Recognising both

preserves enjoyment of a good event and involvement in improving it, without requiring a choice between self-defence and total self-condemnation.

IX. Examine a norm through its function

Before changing an arrangement, ask its purpose. Rapid discussion may keep things lively; a selected book creates a common subject; dinner continues conversation. Then examine whether each particular method is necessary for its function. Announce the subject earlier, supplement lively discussion with prepared questions, or make continued socialising voluntary. An alternative preserves meaning if it actually does so, rather than merely appearing kind.

Interests sometimes diverge. Earlier hours suit one person and later hours another; some value brevity and others detail. Invisible advantage is not always removed by a solution benefiting everyone equally. Name that. A group can discuss different methods, rotation, or the limits of its capacity. Decisions remain imperfect, but understandable grounds allow better assessment than declaring the familiar arrangement natural and therefore beyond explanation.

A change should be visible before participation. If only people who already know whom to ask can find a new option, some previous advantage remains. Include it in an ordinary announcement, explain conditions, and provide a way to check it. There is no need to promise unlimited choice. A few clear options may suffice for the task; usefulness is better checked through action than through the list's length.

Checking includes organisers' additional work. An understandable norm should not rely on one helper's invisible overextension. If a change requires time, agree who has it and how work is shared. Otherwise one habit's advantage is replaced by another habit concealing preparation again. Our question about invisibility applies to the new arrangement as well as the old; benevolent intentions do not exempt either from observation.

After checking, retain what works and name remaining limits. Every inconvenience need not trigger a new project immediately, yet past success should not close a substantive comment. Clarify when the question can return and where to report a specific failure. The norm becomes a discussable part of shared work, still coordinating activity while permitting correction rather than requiring eternal conformity to its first successful form.

X. Visible advantage makes discussion more precise

Return to the book group. The organiser announces material earlier, explains the format, and separates dinner from required attendance. These changes may reduce some preparatory work. They do not make everyone identical, resolve every financial issue, or guarantee profound discussion. Their result is limited: previously hidden conditions have become visible and available for discussion. This is already another way of sustaining a common norm.

A regular participant can clarify their account too. This suits me because I know the procedure and can free the evening is more accurate than it always suits any serious person. A newcomer can report a difficulty without accepting a general description of themselves. Different experiences gain room in discussion without requiring everyone's circumstances, or the feasibility of every proposal, to be treated as identical.

Advantage becomes visible through distinctions: rule and purpose, action and preparation, fact and assumption, consequence and intent. These do not create a final fairness ranking. They help correct a specific omission. A small change matters through a more understandable route and less unnecessary work before substantive participation, rather than through an attractive name.

A familiar norm can remain familiar after examination. Where it is needed, fits the task, and states its conditions, retaining it need not mean refusing attention. But one's own convenience no longer automatically establishes neutrality for everyone. Choices can be explained, limits reported, and new facts heard. Continuity becomes more responsible without requiring useful coordination to be destroyed whenever preferences differ.

The task is not finding people without advantages. Our map cannot deliver such general biographical conclusions. It is remaining willing to see where a familiar arrangement eases one's route and complicates another's preparation. A modest shared action may follow. This preserves dignity and discussion of the norm without turning recognition of a mechanism into categorical accusation or presumed knowledge of intentions.

What this means in practice

Choose one recurring situation: a meeting, class, or shared way of exchanging material. Identify its goal and usual conditions. Separately describe what you know beforehand and what must happen before visible participation. Do not treat your convenience as a general fact. Mark assumptions about others' experience and leave them as questions until an answer exists.

Examine one part of entry: announcement timing, clear instructions, or the optional part's clarity. Ask about the process without demanding personal history. Accept a brief answer or refusal. One account does not represent everyone, but may suggest a specific change. Do not make someone who reports difficulty permanently responsible for educating the group.

Compare the norm's function with its method. What must remain for the shared task? What can be explained earlier or done differently? Choose a small option, state its conditions, and allocate the required work. Check for new invisible burdens on organisers or helpers. A change needs a usable route rather than existence only in a benevolent promise.

After trying it, ask whether a particular preparatory burden decreased and what remains unresolved. Do not call the answer universal. Retain a useful change; otherwise investigate the cause and adjust the method. The aim is a clearer, discussable norm. Self-abasement by those previously comfortable and a final verdict on the entire group are unnecessary for this limited, examinable step.

Key quotation

> *concepts of yesterday*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Human Work, III, pp. 38–41. A short fragment concerning persistent social conceptions. It raises a question about habit rather than supplying an explanation of every contemporary action.

Connections between traditions

Gilman offers historical social criticism of persistent ideas. Dewey considers habit within a pragmatist philosophical framework of interaction with an environment. Their comparison brings both expectations and sustaining arrangements into view. It does not unite every position held by the authors or turn historical arguments into contemporary experimental findings.

Our book group is an authored example; checking entry conditions is a practical application. Genre differences remain important: criticism raises a question, philosophy directs attention, and facts in a particular setting allow assessment of a change. Their comparison especially cannot establish someone's intentions or a permanent characteristic of a social category.

Sources

• B17-R-28-N04-S1. Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Human Work. III, Concept and Conduct, pp. 38–41. Selected context, pp. 37–44, read; a limited contrast and two short fragments used. Racial and biological generalisations are excluded as foundations.

• B17-R-28-N04-S2. John Dewey. Human Nature and Conduct. Part I, § I, pp. 14–17. Displayed introduction and opening Part I context, pp. 10–22, read; not the whole book. Philosophical framework, without direct quotation or contemporary diagnosis.

Tags

norm, habit, advantage, invisibility, preparation, participation, access, arrangement, expectations, assumptions, coordination, time, instructions, conversation, group, newcomer, experience, dignity, responsibility, intentions, consequences, distinction, feedback, change, checking, cooperation, traditions, Gilman, Dewey, United Wisdom

About the authors

Andrey Zarinsh is the author and founder of United Wisdom. He explores inner transformation, the unity of traditions, intercultural dialogue, and contemporary spiritual discipline. Instagram: @andrey.zarinsh.

Maria Evilkut is a co-author of United Wisdom. Alongside her research, she seeks to test these ideas in practice and observe how principles of unity and mutual understanding work in real life between people and cultures. Instagram: @ilkutki.