DIAGNOSING NORMS

We often find ourselves wondering how social practices that cause societal damage, violate human rights, or are plainly inefficient can survive. Think of how corruption holds back economic development, erodes public confidence in government, and undermines the rule of law and fair competition, or how child marriage forces girls out of education and into a life of increased risk of violence, abuse, ill health, or even early death. What motivates such behaviors, and why do they persist, even in the face of laws that prohibit them? Are these practices supported by cultural norms? How do economic and cultural structures interact? Which of these questions is most important to address? Understanding the nature of collective behaviors and why people engage in them is critical for the design of appropriate interventions aimed at social change. There are many collective behaviors that are maladaptive, harmful, or violate what we take to be basic human rights. Addressing these behaviors requires disentangling the personal, social, economic, and cultural factors that support them and assessing their relative weights in sustaining these practices.

Collective behaviors, that is, behavioral patterns shared by a group of individuals, may be studied in a variety of ways. For example, we may explore the functions they perform in a society or group and investigate the environments within which they emerge or disappear. Knowing the functions a practice performs, however, does not tell us if those involved in it are aware of them, or if they act in certain ways *because* of them. We should not make the mistake of conflating the observer's

and the actor's points of view. We may think that a social norm maximizes the welfare of its followers, but this may hardly be the reason why they conform to it. Most of the time, participants are not aware of the social functions that a practice serves. Alternatively, we may focus on the reasons why people engage in such behaviors by investigating the incentives and constraints that they face when undertaking an established behavior or adopting a new one. These two approaches are fully compatible, and the importance of stressing one or the other depends upon our intellectual and practical goals. Especially when wanting to change or promote a particular collective behavior, we must understand its nature and the reasons why people take part in it.

In this chapter, I will distinguish between collective behaviors that are completely *independent*, as when they are purely determined by economic or natural reasons, and *interdependent*, as when other people's actions and opinions matter to one's choice.[1] I want to differentiate actions that are undertaken because we care about what other people do or think from actions that we have reason to carry out without regard for other people's behavior or beliefs. These distinctions are important because in order to implement policies to encourage or discourage certain collective behaviors or practices, we need to understand their nature, or the reasons why people engage in them. In what follows, I shall offer a clear and simple way to distinguish between independent and interdependent behaviors and among different types of interdependent behaviors.

Habits, social customs, and moral injunctions are independent, in the sense that they involve undertaking certain actions regardless of what others do or expect us to do. For

1. When I say "independence," I do not refer to outcome-independence: in a purely competitive market, each agent acts independently, but the final outcome is the product of a myriad of individual choices. The market outcome *depends* on the actions of all the market participants, but this is not the dependence I am interested in.

example, we wear warm clothes in winter and use umbrellas when it rains, independently of what our friends or neighbors do, and we may obey kashrut dietary laws whether or not other Jews respect them. Conventions such as signaling systems, fads, fashions, and social norms such as reciprocity rules are all interdependent behaviors, and social norms are the foremost example of interdependence. However, as I will make clear later on, not all collective behaviors are interdependent, and not all interdependent behaviors are social norms.

This chapter draws on Bicchieri 2006, ch. 1, although some of the details provided here are different from those in the book. Here my aim is to offer simple tools that help to quickly decide whether the collective behavior we care about is a norm or more simply a shared custom, and if it is a norm, what sort of norm it is. Without this knowledge, promoting social change would be difficult, as we would be at a loss about where and how to intervene. The same practice could be a custom, a convention, or a social norm in different populations. Being able to determine why it is followed will help us suggest the most appropriate intervention. In what follows I shall rely on concepts such as expectations and preferences, all of which are relatively easy to measure and handle, especially in light of wanting to conduct experiments or field surveys. *How* we come to the conclusion that a collective behavior is a social norm is the subject of the next chapter, where I will discuss ways to measure norms that are based on the concepts introduced here.

Here I shall offer a few static definitions. They are *static* because in real life, the social constructs I talk about may morph into each other and often do. A custom may become a social norm in time, and a social norm may revert to a custom (think of the use of white wedding dresses). This dynamic process merits investigation, but for the moment I will be treating social constructs as separate, fixed entities. This classification will help us diagnose the nature of a practice or action pattern, in turn suggesting the best way to encourage or discourage it.

How individuals relate to certain patterns of behavior determines the pattern's nature. There are highways where most people drive over the speed limit, precincts with low voter turnout, pockets of resistance to polio vaccination, littered environments, countries where bribing is endemic, and cultures where girls are married at a very young age. What drives these behaviors? Are choices independent or interdependent? Understanding the motives behind these collective behaviors is critical to changing them.

Diagnosing collective patterns of behavior as interdependent, and being very specific about the nature of this interdependence, will help us decide what sort of intervention offers the best chance of success. Think of widespread HIV awareness campaigns in African countries, where condoms are freely distributed to the population, yet the number of newly infected people is increasing. Distributing condoms and relying on information campaigns about the risks of unprotected sex is insufficient if men share a common view of masculinity that glorifies promiscuity and if they refrain from using condoms at home for fear of giving away the existence of "other women." When behaviors are interdependent, we have to consider entire communities, as individuals' choices depend on what people who are important to them do, and possibly also on what they judge appropriate or inappropriate.

Think of child marriage, an interdependent practice that many governments and international organizations are actively trying to eliminate. According to the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), 100 million girls will be married before the age of eighteen in the coming decade. Most live in sub-Saharan Africa and the Asian Subcontinent. A variety of potential causes have been explored. The parents of child brides are often poor and use marriage as a way to provide for their daughter's future, especially in areas where there are few economic opportunities for women. Some families use marriage

to build and strengthen alliances, to seal property deals, settle disputes, or pay off debts. In some cultures, child marriage is encouraged to increase the number of pregnancies and ensure enough children survive into adulthood to work on family land and support elderly relatives. In South Asia, some families marry off all their daughters at the same time to reduce the cost of the wedding ceremony. Chastity and family honor are another major reason, as many parents want to make sure their daughters do not have a child out-of-wedlock (Bicchieri, Lindemans, and Jiang 2014).

There are a variety of cultural reasons for child marriage, but in most cases, the social pressure to marry very young girls is intense. In India's southern state of Tamil Nadu, some communities have a strong social stigma against girls being married after puberty. Often African families report fearing that if girls receive an education, they will be less willing to fulfill their traditional roles as wife and mother, and so it will be difficult for them to find a husband, with negative consequences for the family. Trying to induce a change in behavior critically depends upon understanding the reasons behind the choices. In many cases such choices are driven by a combination of shared factual beliefs (about the value of education and how best to protect a girl), social expectations (what other families do and think is appropriate), and normative (or religious) constraints (what good parents should do).

Let us imagine two separate groups who marry their daughters as soon as they reach puberty. These practices look identical, but the beliefs supporting them are very different, and these differences have major consequences for policies aimed at curbing the practice. Members of the first group believe their religion calls for early marriage, and deviating from a religious injunction will bring disgrace to the entire family. They may entertain a host of other beliefs about marriage: they may believe that a young bride is more

valuable, more fertile, more likely to obey her in-laws, will be protected from sexual violence or out-of-wedlock births that would dishonor the family, and so on. The members of the second group have similar beliefs, but lack the religious principle that fosters the first group's practice. In both cases, the social pressure to marry young girls will be intense, but within the first group the religious beliefs will represent a major stumbling block to changing marriage practices. We may work hard to change some factual beliefs in both groups, and possibly succeed. We may build safe schools for girls, and help appease fears of violence and dishonor, pay parents for attendance and subsequently provide jobs to the girls, but the unconditional allegiance to a religious creed will be much harder to overcome. I will explore the factors that differentiate these two groups—which would inform the design of policies aiming at changing these practices—in a later section of this chapter.

CONDITIONAL PREFERENCES

In what follows I offer a simple way to discriminate between behavioral patterns shared by a group. The concepts I use to this effect are those of *preference* and *expectation*. Preferences are dispositions to act in a particular way in a specific situation. When I say that I prefer to drive to school instead of taking the train, I mean that, if given the choice, I would take the car. Often people make the mistake of equating preference with "liking better." If I choose a vanilla ice cream instead of a chocolate one, you may infer that I like vanilla better. What you may not know is that I adore chocolate but am allergic to it. So despite liking chocolate more, I prefer (choose) vanilla instead. What preference really means is that, in a choice situation, if

I choose A over B it must be the case that, *all things considered*, I prefer A. Preference and choice are thus strictly connected.

Preferences may be strictly individual (like the ice cream example), or they may be social. For example, I may not eat ice cream when I am out with friends since they have passionate views about dieting. Social preferences may take into account the behavior, beliefs, and outcomes of other people that, presumably, matter to the decision maker. Some such preferences are consequentialist, in that the decision maker only cares about the final outcome, not how it was obtained, nor whether the other parties had expectations about his or her choice. Say you have a preference for fair divisions. Then, if you have to choose how to allocate some good, you will take into account how much of it goes to other claimants, and you may feel guilty if you take too much for yourself. Alternatively, you may be envious and resent an allocation that grants a larger share to others, or you might even be spiteful and want to maximize the difference between what you and others receive. In all of these cases, you care about what you get *and* what others get, too. You make social comparisons, but you may not be concerned about what the other parties do or believe, or how the outcome came about. Your only concern is how the final outcome is allocated. So someone who decides to split a sum of money into equal parts may be moved by an independent desire to be fair, or instead she may respond to what she believes is expected of her. In both cases we say that she has a *social preference*, though she might be influenced either by a social comparison or by social expectations.

Social preferences that are based on social comparisons can be *unconditional*, in that one's choice is not influenced by knowing how others act in similar situations or what they approve/disapprove of. If instead one chooses an action based on expectations about what others do or believe should be done, then such preferences are *conditional* on those actions and

beliefs. For example, a mother may choose to overtly beat her child because all the other parents around her do so, and she fears being looked down upon or reprimanded if she does not hit him hard. In fact, she might not like to punish so harshly, but what would the neighbors think of her? In this case, we say that her "preference" for corporal punishment is conditional upon her social expectations. She chooses to hit because she sees other parents hitting, and she believes that she would suffer negative consequences if she behaved differently and her behavior could be detected. Saying that she has a social preference for beating her disobedient child does not tell us whether her preference is unconditional, that is, she is genuinely convinced about the merits of corporal punishment, or is conditional, in that she is influenced by what her neighbors think and do.

Returning to the case of fair division, you may not care at all about fairness per se, but you nevertheless divide the good equally because you are sensitive to what others normally do and expect you to do. In other words, you have a preference for sharing conditional on the fact that others share. This is quite different from being independently motivated to act fairly. The social preferences I will be talking about are mostly conditional, in the sense that the behaviors of interest often depend on what other people that matter to the actor think and do. Interdependent actions, as we shall see, always involve socially conditional preferences.[2] Table 1.1 describes different kinds of preferences, using the simple example of preferring or not preferring to eat apples.

Preferences should not be confused with what social psychologists call "attitudes" (Fishbein 1967). An *attitude* is understood as an evaluative disposition toward some object, person,

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2. From now on, when I talk of conditional preferences, I always mean "socially" conditional preferences.

Table 1.1

CLASSIFYING DIFFERENT TYPES OF PREFERENCES

	Individual preferences	Social preferences
Unconditional	"I want apples."	"I want more apples than you."
Conditional	"I want apples if it is autumn."	"I want apples if my friends want apples."

or behavior. It can be expressed by statements such as "I like/ dislike," "I believe one should/should not," and "I approve/disapprove of." Attitudes thus include *personal* normative beliefs that express a person's positive or negative evaluation of particular behaviors. Such personal normative beliefs, in turn, can be prudential, or they can have a "moral"[3] motivation. I may disapprove of smoking in a prudential sense because I know its negative health effects. In other words, I believe that smoking is inadvisable or not in one's best interest. Historically, smoking by women was strongly disapproved in a moral sense in that it was seen as a sign of debauchery and lack of womanly virtues. Such a moral personal normative belief implies that one's ethical convictions motivate disapproval. I shall return to this point in the next section.

We know from economics that preferences and choices are positively correlated. What about attitudes and choices? We might expect that people who positively evaluate a particular behavior would engage in the behavior to a greater degree than others might. If a group of people thinks that drinking alcohol is acceptable, should we not witness a lot of drinking in this

3. Here and elsewhere, I use "moral" in the broad sense of the term, as referring to certain codes of conduct adopted by an individual, a group or a society.

population? Unfortunately, it has been consistently observed that general attitudes and behavior are weakly correlated, if they are correlated at all (Wicker 1969).[4] Individuals may express positive judgments toward behaviors that they nevertheless do not engage in. Why so? To answer, consider that most of our choices are not made in a vacuum. We are social animals embedded in thick networks of relations, and what we do has consequences, for us and for others. Interdependence, not independence, rules social life. Indeed, a host of studies show that the main variable affecting behavior is not what one personally likes or thinks he should do, but rather one's belief about what "society" (i.e., most other people, people who matter to us, and the like) approves of (see, e.g., Bicchieri and Muldoon 2011; Fishbein 1967).

A woman might *prefer* not to breastfeed after giving birth, even if she has learned about the advantages of feeding colostrum to the baby, or a family might *prefer* to give their young daughter in marriage even if they would have liked it better to send her to school and wait. These choices occur regardless of the mother or family's attitudes toward these practices. All these preferences are conditional on expecting people who matter to us to do the same, approve of such behaviors, and possibly punish deviations. Having a conditional preference implies that one may have a reason to avoid early breastfeeding or marry off one's child, which is different from liking and endorsing these practices. To uncover the reasons why a collective behavior survives, we have to look beyond attitudes to the beliefs and conditional preferences of those who engage in it. This is why I like to use almost exclusively preferences and expectations in

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4. However, when there is a high level of correspondence between an attitude and a behavior, then attitudes can be predictive of behaviors; see Ajzen and Fishbein 1977.

my analysis of norms. They are easy to measure, and measuring them lets us meaningfully classify collective behaviors.

SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS

People who have conditional social preferences care about what others who matter to them do and/or approve of. They have expectations that influence their behavior (Bicchieri 2014). A driver will stop on red and go on green because she has expectations about how other drivers will behave and how they expect her to behave. A parent who beats a child will have expectations about what other parents in his neighborhood do, and how they may judge him. These *expectations* are just beliefs. We have all sorts of beliefs. We believe that tomorrow it will rain, and we believe that people drive faster on I-96 than the speed limit and are hardly monitored. Beliefs can be factual or they can be normative. Both "I believe that colostrum is dirty and dangerous for the baby" and "I believe that dowry costs increase with the bride's age" are *factual* beliefs, beliefs about states of affairs, though only one is true. As we shall see later on, belief change is an important part of social change. People need *reasons* to change, and realizing that some of their factual beliefs are false can give them the needed push to consider alternatives. Beliefs like "women should cover their heads and faces" are instead *normative*, in that the "should" expresses an evaluation—it signals approval of veiling women.

Expectations are beliefs about what is going to happen or what should happen; both presuppose a continuity between past and present or future. In what follows, I will only refer to *social expectations*, that is, the expectations we have about other people's behaviors and beliefs. Some social expectations are factual or empirical: they are beliefs about how other people

are going to act or react in certain situations. We may have observed how people behave, or some trusted source may have told us that people behave in such and such a way. If we have reason to believe that they will continue to act as in the past, we will have formed empirical expectations about their future behavior. What matters to our analysis is that very often these *empirical expectations influence our decisions.* For example, if every time I go to England I observe people driving on the left side of the road, and I have no reason to think there has been a change, I will expect left-side driving the next time around. Wanting to avoid an accident, I will drive on the left side, too.

Other social expectations are normative, in that they express our belief that other people believe (and will continue to believe) that certain behaviors are praiseworthy and should be carried out, while others should be avoided. *Normative (social) expectations are beliefs about other people's personal normative beliefs* (i.e., they are second-order beliefs). "I believe that the women in my village believe that a good mother should abstain from nursing her newborn baby" is a normative expectation, and it may have a powerful influence on behavior. Table 1.2 exemplifies the important differences between different types of beliefs.

Table 1.2

CLASSIFICATION OF NORMATIVE/NON-NORMATIVE AND SOCIAL/NON-SOCIAL BELIEFS

	Non-social beliefs	*Social beliefs*
Non-normative beliefs	Factual beliefs	Empirical expectations
Normative beliefs	Personal normative beliefs	Normative expectations

Important distinctions among personal normative beliefs are often missed in surveys, because questions about attitudes are often too vague to capture these distinctions. Attitude questions can include questions about personal normative beliefs, but no distinction is made between prudential versus "moral" normative beliefs. It is important to recognize the difference between different types of normativity. For example, a survey may pose questions like "do you believe that a wife should refrain from committing adultery?"; all the researcher attains with such questions are just the nonspecific personal normative beliefs of the responder.[5] Say two people, Anan and Dayo, both answer "yes" to the first question. Anan thinks that adultery always ultimately gets discovered, and the adulterer would be wise to renounce carnal temptations to avoid punishment, so her answer reflects a prudential "should." Dayo's answer instead reflects her judgment about adultery as a reprehensible breach of faith and trust in a marriage, regardless of the social consequences such actions incur. Dayo's "should" has a different, strongly normative connotation. How would new information change their minds? Given an environment in which adultery is tolerated or reliably undetectable, Anan could easily change her mind, but Dayo would not be swayed in her conviction about the ills of adultery. I shall discuss the difficulties involved in belief change in chapter 3.

Personal normative beliefs may or may not coincide with one's normative expectations. A woman may believe that she ought to infibulate her daughter, or she may be less sanguine about infibulation, and in both cases believe that her fellow villagers think she *ought* to infibulate her child. If she is obeying her group's norm to infibulate the child, regardless of her

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5. I am for the moment assuming that the responder is sincere and a social desirability bias has been avoided. As we shall see in chapter 2, this assumption is often wrong.

personal normative beliefs, her behavior will be influenced by her beliefs about what relevant others think she should do— that is, her normative expectations. Notice that normative expectations always express an indirect evaluation: one believes that other people think one *ought* to behave in a certain way (or refrain from behaving in a certain way), where the *ought*, as we shall see, is not merely prudent. The man who beats his wife may believe that his neighbors approve of such behavior, that they think he should chastise her if she misbehaves. Again, this expectation presupposes some continuity between what was approved/disapproved in the past and what is approved/disapproved now and in the future.

But whose actions or approval do we care about? Depending on the circumstances, different people will matter to our decisions. They may be family members, clan or village members, religious authorities, co-workers, bystanders, and whoever in that moment has the power to influence our choice. What we expect them to do matters; what we think they believe we ought to do matters. I call the range of people whom we care about when making particular decisions our *reference network* because they may be spread around and not be physically present. The Pakistani man who killed his "dishonored" daughter in Milan, where he had lived for twenty years, was only concerned with the strict honor code of the relatives and friends in his Pakistani village. That was his reference network, not his Italian co-workers or neighbors. In Brazil, favela dwellers only punish stealing within their group, not stealing outside their group, so an action that is prohibited within a reference network may be permissible outside of it. It is important to keep in mind that a crucial element of any empirical study of social norms will be the identification of the reference network against which expectations are set.

For the time being, let us agree that there are two types of social expectations, empirical and normative, that they

involve a reference network, and often, alone or in combination, influence our behavior. Let us now see what might be the relation between preferences, expectations, and patterns of behavior.

CUSTOMS

Imagine observing a common pattern of behavior: when it rains, we see that people normally use umbrellas. Do they use umbrellas because other people do? Are their choices influenced by social expectations? If so, which expectations matter? Would they use umbrellas irrespective of what others do? These are questions we should ask if we want to diagnose the nature of collective behaviors.

Like using umbrellas when it rains, certain action patterns are created and sustained by the motivations of actors acting independently. Suppose you live in an environment where water is scarce and latrines do not exist. All find it useful to satisfy their bodily needs by defecating in the open. This action meets their needs and will therefore be repeated. This repetition will create a habit. Since people have similar needs, the habitual action that meets their needs will become a *custom*. The consistency of the pattern is due to the actors' similar motivations and conditions. Each actor acts independently, and the result is an emergent pattern of behavior that reproduces itself. Each individual knows that everybody else in her community acts in a similar way, but this awareness does not serve as a motive for doing what one does anyway, out of sheer need or convenience. As we shall see later on, these motives may act as drags on social change. I thus define a custom as follows:

A custom is a pattern of behavior such that individuals (unconditionally) prefer to conform to it because it meets their needs.

Clearly, in the case of customs, preferences are unconditional. Expecting other people to behave in a similar way does not influence one's behavior, since this expectation is not a reason to persist in or change one's habit. We know that other people use umbrellas, but so what? Whatever they do, we will keep using our umbrellas when it rains!

Not all customs are benign, though they may efficiently serve some basic needs. Open defecation is an example of a custom that presents a huge sanitation problem in many parts of the world. It is estimated that 15 percent of the world population practices open defecation, with extremely negative health consequences, as well as social costs that are less easy to quantify.[6]

Customs can change in several ways. We may discover alternative, better means to satisfy our needs, the external conditions that produce these needs may cease to exist, new preferences may be created, or a combination of such changes may come about. Sometimes we come to grasp the advantages of new behaviors, but if there are costs involved, change may be hard to come by. This difficulty is due to the fact that the proposed alternative often requires collective action. The collective custom is a pattern of independent actions, but changing it introduces interdependencies. For example, abandoning open defecation requires first a change in factual beliefs about the health and social costs of this practice. The next step consists in building latrines, using them, and maintaining

6. The majority of those practicing open defecation live in rural areas. Open defecation in rural areas persists in every region of the developing world, even among those who have otherwise reached high levels of improved sanitation use. For instance, the proportion of rural dwellers still practicing open defecation is 9 percent in Northern Africa and 17 percent in Latin America and the Caribbean. Open defecation is highest in rural areas of Southern Asia, where it is practiced by 55 percent of the population.

them operational. This process requires the engagement of the whole community, which has to allocate tasks and ensure that the old ways are abandoned; otherwise the health benefits of having functioning latrines may be lost. Here the individual incentive to continue with the established habit may conflict with the collective benefit of having better sanitation. People facing change confront a *social dilemma*: it is individually tempting (and most convenient) to stick to the old habit, but everyone would benefit from a collective shift to latrines. Yet if only some use latrines, the sanitation benefit is lost: water and land pollution will still occur. In this case, not only would everyone have to be convinced to change their ways, but the new behavior, in order to survive, would have to be supported by both the expectation that others are engaging in it and the expectation that most people think that the behavior should be followed. Such expectations played no role in the custom's survival, but they become critical for its demise.

What matters for the present discussion is that a *collective* process of belief change may be necessary to implement a new pattern of behavior, even when abandoning simple customs, especially if the new behavior requires the collaboration of everyone to be sustained. Collective belief change may not be sufficient in all those cases in which carrying out the new behavior involves a social dilemma. In cases of open defecation, building and maintaining latrines requires a collective effort and the introduction of sanctions to ensure continuous compliance, since even a few defectors can have a powerfully detrimental effect on a group's hygiene. Therefore monitoring adherence to the new behavior becomes all the more critical. Yet the introduction of sanctions, though crucial, is secondary to the initial process of factual belief change. People must first recognize the negative consequences of open defecation. How customs can be changed, and the challenges of sustaining new behaviors, is a topic I will discuss in the third chapter.

DESCRIPTIVE NORMS

There are many collective behaviors that may look like customs but are instead influenced by social expectations. These collective behaviors depend on expectations about what others do or expect one to do in a similar situation. Such behaviors display various degrees of interdependence, depending on whether expectations are normative or empirical, unilateral or multilateral. I use the word *descriptive norm* to refer to all those interdependent behaviors where preferences are conditional on empirical expectations alone.

Let me add a note of warning, since my definition is unconventional. The term "descriptive norm" is widely employed to mean "what is commonly done," what is usual and customary (Schultz et al. 2007). It describes how people typically act, what they regularly do in particular situations. I find this definition too vague and of little practical use. The traditional understanding of a descriptive norm includes, for example, a custom like open defecation, a fashion like wearing high heels, or the use of a common signaling system, like traffic lights or language, for coordination purposes.

While the perceived existence of a custom alone does not cause people to engage in it, the perceived existence of a fashion or common signaling system can do so. A custom is a *consequence* of independently motivated actions that happen to be similar to each other, whereas a common signaling system *causes* action via the joint force of expectations and a desire to coordinate with other users of the system. The existence of an established fashion *causes* an action that is consistent with it via the presence of expectations and the desire to imitate the trendy. Depending on the context, one might copy those in proximity, those in similar situations, those with similar characteristics, or those who are similar in some other relevant way. One may copy either what one perceives to be the most

frequent action or the most successful actors. Women buy very high heels not for the (zero) comfort of the shoe, but instead because they want to be fashionable, copy trendsetters, and expect other women in their circle to do the same. Once a fashion is established, it will induce actions in line with it. I thus define a descriptive norm as follows (Bicchieri 2006):

> *A descriptive norm is a pattern of behavior such that individuals prefer to conform to it on condition that they believe that most people in their reference network conform to it* (empirical expectation).

There are two elements here that differentiate a descriptive norm from a shared custom. In the case of a descriptive norm, people do not prefer to engage in a particular behavior irrespective of what others do. Instead, their preference for conformity is *conditional* upon observing (or believing) how others act. The "others" in this case must be somehow relevant to the actor. The *reference network* may be scattered, and may not necessarily coincide with groups one associates with daily. In the television series *The Sopranos*, many of the characters' behaviors were based on what they (wrongly) believed to be the customary ways in Italy, only to realize later on that modern Italians had moved well beyond those patterns. A young woman in Philadelphia wearing very high heels will probably not care what other women do in India, or even New Orleans. Her reference network may be the "fashionable" crowd in her town, those who she is likely to meet and give her a chance to "show off," or it may be a celebrity, magazine starlets, or TV series that girls in her reference network follow.[7] In the case of significant media influence, it is important to recognize that those who watch the television

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7. The TV show *Sex and the City* was associated with a spike in sales of Manolo Blahnik shoes.

program or read the popular magazine know that "everyone is reading/watching that" where "everyone" presumably refers to people that matter to one's choice to adopt a fashion. One of the reasons the media can be so influential in initiating or changing behavior is precisely the viewer or reader's awareness that many others in her reference network receive the same message.

In descriptive norms, expectations about what others are doing play a decisive role in choosing (or avoiding) an action, as in their absence different actions may be chosen. The main difference between a custom and a descriptive norm lies in the *reasons* why people follow them, since from an observational viewpoint, the practices may look identical. Understanding this distinction is crucial if we want to promote behavioral change. To change a negative custom, we may want to start by trying to convince individuals that a particular action or practice—though it meets a need—has serious drawbacks, and then propose feasible alternatives. People normally have factual beliefs about the consequences of their actions, and changing those beliefs is the first step to changing behavior. With descriptive norms, we have to engage the norm-following group in a more complex way, as expectations play a crucial role in sustaining the practice. To enact change, the empirical expectations of most participants have to change. This proves to be challenging, as change, to succeed, has to be synchronized. If I wear very high heels because of the drive to imitate the fashionable and the concurring belief that most women in my social network now wear them, it is not sufficient to observe a few women behaving differently (especially if they are not trendsetters).[8] I must be convinced that very high heels

8. Trendsetters are early adopters, people who start (or follow early on) a new trend before most other people. Psychologists still debate whether there are specific character traits that make people trendsetters, apart from their social position (some may be in positions of power or privilege). I discuss trendsetters' characteristics in much more detail in chapter 5.

are now out of fashion. The same goes for a signaling system. Since our goal is coordinated communication, we have to be convinced that everybody we may communicate with is moving to another system of signals before we change, too. Coordinated change is obviously critical. How this can be accomplished is the subject of the last two chapters, where I discuss social change. What should be clear is that the means employed to change a collective practice must be tailored to its nature.

Imitation and Coordination

Why people have conditional preferences, why they prefer to do something if they expect others to do it, and why some behaviors become viral are all questions relevant to understanding social change, especially change that involves abandoning or creating norms. Economic, legal, and political changes often instigate or accompany norm change. Yet if norms, descriptive or otherwise, exist because followers have certain preferences and expectations, exogenous changes might not be sufficient to induce meaningful behavioral change. In any event, they will be successful only if they produce and coordinate a collective change in expectations.

In his essay "On Sumptuary Laws," Montaigne ([1580] 2003) cleverly observed that sixteenth-century French laws aiming at restricting superfluous and excessive consumption among the merchant class often had the opposite effect.

> The way by which our laws attempt to regulate idle and vain expenses in meat and clothes, seems to be quite contrary to the end designed. . . . For to enact that none but princes shall eat turbot, shall wear velvet or gold lace, and interdict these things to the people, what is it but to bring them into a greater esteem, and to set every one more agog to eat and wear them? (Montaigne [1580] 2003, 300)

In this case, prohibiting imitation of the aristocratic ways made them ever more attractive to commoners. If anything, preferences were reinforced.

In other cases exogenous triggers may work quite well. When we want to coordinate with others, any change in expectations will lead to a change in (conditional) preferences and behavior. An external intervention that credibly changes social expectations will most certainly produce a change in preferences in this setting. On September 3, 1967, traffic in Sweden switched from driving on the left-hand side of the road to the right. The change was mandated by the government and went on smoothly, presumably because nobody wanted to keep driving on the left side of the road when the expectation was that now everybody would drive on the right-hand side.

Coordination is different from imitation. With imitation, those I imitate do not expect me to behave like they do and may not even know they are being imitated, so my expectations are unilateral. When a girl imitates an actress or the fashionable group in her school, they do not expect *her* to act as they do. What matters is that she expects *them* to act in a certain way. And this is true for each and every imitator. With coordination, expectations are instead multilateral. If you and I want to coordinate on wearing a bandanna of the same color, it matters what each of us expects the other to do. To succeed, our expectations have to match. An external intervention can potentially change social behavior if it works as a coordinating device, changing multilateral expectations. It is much less apt to succeed with imitation, unless it mandates a change in the imitated party.

Many descriptive norms do not directly fulfill a coordination function, even if we observe what appears to be coordinated behavior. It is often noticed that portfolio managers tend to make similar financial choices and offer similar advice to clients. One reason for this is that nobody is capable of predicting market gyrations, and in case the market tanks it is better

to be aligned with the herd, so as to diffuse responsibility for a bad choice and relativize losses. Those managers do not intentionally coordinate, but rather imitate each other. Imitative behavior is widespread in every society. When uncertain, we look at what others are doing to resolve insecurity about making a decision. Before buying a refrigerator or a car, or hiring a landscaper, we often go to websites that list buyers' comments about products and services. Websites like Angie's List, Yahoo, or Amazon owe their fortune to social proof, our tendency to imitate others' choices because we grant them superior knowledge of the product or service (they bought it!).

Imitation, or conformity to others' behavior, has two components: *informational* and *normative* (Deutsch and Gerard 1955). In new, uncertain, or ambiguous situations, we often turn to others to gather information and obtain guidance. Imitation may be rational if collecting information is very hard or very costly, if we lack expertise, or instead if the choice is unimportant, so a wrong decision is not the end of the world. When many people make similar choices, we tend to take it as evidence of effective, adaptive behavior. Note that large numbers are not necessary to induce imitation. People often imitate the behavior of the successful, guessing that some observable traits correlate with their accomplishments. "Dress for success" is a glaring example of this naïve belief.

We all have a natural desire "to be correct," and often what is correct is defined by our social reality: I know I am a good runner when I compare my record to those of other runners. The case of financial managers is a little different: their herding behavior has the effect of minimizing potential losses. In situations of great uncertainty, it pays to "follow the herd," for if circumstances deteriorate, one will not look that bad (*"everyone was doing it!"*).

Besides being correct, people also want to be liked, to belong, and to "go along with the crowd." We often adopt the

prevailing group standards and behaviors to gain (or avoid losing) social appreciation, respect, and acceptance. In the case of informational influence, there is no social pressure to conform to other people's views and beliefs, nor is one expected to conform. As I said, expectations are unilateral. With normative influence, there may or may not be group pressure to conform. That is, one may conform because one wants to gain acceptance or be liked, but a lack of conformity will not necessarily be reproached by the group.

Let us go back for a moment to our fashion slave. What motivates her to buy those uncomfortable, high-heel shoes? Both informational and normative influences are likely at work. On the one hand, she wants to imitate the fashionable crowd, as looking at what they wear is giving her valuable information about what is now "in." On the other hand, being fashionable makes her feel she belongs to a valuable group, and she will possibly become more popular if she dresses like them. However, nobody is going to require that she wears high heels, and nobody will spend time and energy reprimanding her for not doing so.

A similar case was reported by a participant in the Penn-UNICEF training course on social norms. The wife of a village chief independently decided to breastfeed her children from birth. This was unusual behavior because it was widely believed that colostrum was dirty and might damage the baby. The fact that the woman was powerful and that her children seemed healthy "despite" being breastfed at an early age induced a wave of imitation. In this case, there was the normative influence of wanting to imitate and please the powerful in addition to the informational influence of the confidence that she displayed when defying old habits.

A different case is one in which employees in a coffee shop "salt" the tip jar. Here they play on the common tendency of "doing as others do" and wish clients will be induced to leave a

tip, like others appear to have done. They hope clients will feel social pressure to leave a tip. Again, there is no evident reproach for not doing it, aside from perhaps a slight embarrassment on the client's part. Fashions and fads, "imitating the successful," social proof, and salting the tip jar are all examples of behaviors that are driven by unilateral expectations.

Now think of coordinating on a signal, a multilateral situation. Signals may be as complex as a language, or as simple as traffic lights. Here the normative influence may vary from nil to significant. If I stop using a signal that many others use, as in the case of a widely spoken language, nobody will possibly care, and I will be the only one to pay a price, for I will be ignored. But think of stopping (unilaterally) to obey traffic lights. Running a red light not only endangers my own life, but also endangers other people's lives as well. To safely use traffic lights, everyone must expect that all drivers stop at red and go at green. If people start disregarding the signal, coordination is lost, and everybody is put at risk. When we call those who disregard a red light "crazy" or "idiots," we imply that they are doing something that can damage them too. So, there certainly is a normative influence here, but is it superseding everything else? What are the *main* reasons why people stop at a red light? Is there a temptation not to? If there were no blame for disregarding traffic signals, would people disregard them? If your reason to stop is that you expect other drivers to obey traffic lights and thus drive smoothly and safely, your empirical expectation and the desire to coordinate with other drivers are what matters most to your choice. Traffic conventions, once established, do not require the force of law or social enforcement to sustain themselves. It is in everyone's self-interest to follow the convention, as deviation does not pay.

The coordination motive is very different from imitation, in that expectations are multilateral and stem from a desire to harmonize our actions with those of others so that each of our

individual goals can be achieved. Signaling systems, language rules, rules of etiquette, and dress codes are all examples of descriptive norms that are driven by multilateral expectations.

A preference for following a descriptive norm may involve both informational and normative influences, or the wish to coordinate with others, but *this preference remains conditional on empirical expectations alone.* This means that if these expectations were to change, preferences and behavior would change too. There is a causal relationship between expectations, preferences, and behavior. If we want to claim that descriptive norms have causal influence, it is not sufficient to look for a correlation between expectations and behavior as evidence (i.e., to observe that certain expectations and certain behaviors frequently occur together). There are many correlations that are causally irrelevant. Wearing warm clothes in winter is a collective habit motivated by the need to keep the body warm. We do not choose to wear warm clothes *because* we expect others to wear them.[9] Our choice is independent of expectations. If we were to query Philadelphia residents, we would find out that everyone expects other residents to wear warm clothes in winter. And we may also observe that the individuals we have queried wear warm clothes in winter. We do have a correlation between expectations and choices (they occur together in a consistent way). But are those expectations *causally relevant* to the behavior we observe? Or does the observed behavior instead generate the expectation?

Causal relations involve counterfactual dependence: A and B both occurred, but if A had not occurred (and B had no other sufficient cause), B would not have occurred either. For example, if we think that lack of water is the main reason why people do not build latrines, we must be prepared to say that, if water

9. That said, the *kind* of warm clothes we wear may be fashion-based, and thus influenced by expectations.

were abundant (contrary to the fact that it is scarce), then latrines would be built and used.[10] I am greatly simplifying here, but these are the basic ideas. We can be pretty sure that were we to observe people going around scantily dressed in a harsh winter, our expectations would change, but our behavior would not. When I was teaching at Carnegie Mellon University, many computer students braved the winter snow in T-shirts, shorts, and flip-flops. Most of us looked at them as alien nerds as we snuggled in our warm coats.

My view about descriptive norms, as opposed to customs, is that they have a causal influence on behavior. Expecting members of our reference network to behave according to the descriptive norm (i.e., expecting a consistent pattern of behavior), and having preferences conditional on these expectations induces individuals to conform to that pattern. In this case, we would observe that expectations and behavior are strongly correlated, but to know why we must know what mechanism produces the correlation. To find out, we need to experimentally manipulate one or more factors (the independent variables) to observe their effect on behavior (the dependent variable). It is important to give both independent and dependent variables precise operational definitions that specify how to manipulate the independent variable (in our case, empirical expectations) and how to measure the dependent variable (conforming behavior).

In the next chapter I will discuss at length how to measure norms, and in particular, how to manipulate expectations to assess causality. For example, one way to influence empirical expectations is to tell one group of participants in an experiment

10. Many interventions have been based on the belief that economic or ecological conditions are the most important causal factors, and that changing them would dramatically improve the situation. Since many such interventions failed, we must be aware that it is of foremost importance to correctly identify causal factors.

about the behavior of other participants in a similar past experiment (thereby changing their empirical expectations). Another group of participants (the control group) instead is not given any information. If there is a significant difference in behavior between the two groups, we can be fairly certain that expectations matter to choice (Bicchieri and Xiao 2009).

Another, less precise way to check for a causal connection is to ask counterfactual or simply hypothetical questions. If a behavioral pattern is very common, we may ask those who conform to it what they would do if most people in their reference network were to behave differently. Would they stick to the behavior? If not, why not?

Empirical expectations must be coupled with a conditional preference for conforming; otherwise they will have no influence on behavior. Conformity may be driven by the desire to imitate or to coordinate with others. But what about when normative influences play a stronger role? What about behaviors that are keenly endorsed by a reference network, so much so that deviation gets punished and compliance praised? What about situations in which the expectation of approval and disapproval, the acknowledged presence of sanctions, act as important motivators? In these cases, we are dealing with social norms.

SOCIAL NORMS

Consider the following scene. A long line of people is waiting to buy a ticket for a popular movie. Someone approaches the first person in line and offers a few dollars to take her place. When I give this example to my class, students react with outrage. "If I were in line behind the guy, I would get mad," and "it is unfair to those who wait patiently" are common reactions. If the payment is to literally cut in front of the first person, then

the exchange is imposing a negative externality on everyone behind her in the queue because they now have to wait one person longer. She has no right to sell her place. Indeed, paying for jumping a queue elicits strong disapproval.[11]

Alternatively, think what would happen if somebody at the end of a long line went to the person who was first in line, and offered him money to switch places. In this case, nobody would be disadvantaged. Nevertheless, many would find this exchange objectionable. A common concern is that if we allow people to jump ahead in queues of all sorts (as opposed to waiting in line), there is a fundamental sense that people are not treated equally. If economic efficiency is the argument, why not allow someone to sell her vote as well? While inefficient, queues embody a standard of fairness in which nobody is more important than another and anyone can be subject to a wait. In a world where people can buy their way up, we can imagine a class of people who are rich and never have to wait, and a class who always must wait because their time is less valuable as determined by what they can pay. Many would find such a world repulsive.

In the first example, people would feel entitled to protest, even block the transaction. In the second, even if we deeply dislike the deal, we usually feel we do not have a right to complain. Why this difference? What makes us feel we have a right to expect certain behaviors but not others? The second transaction is a *private* one, and though we may dislike it, we recognize that people have a right to conduct their private business as they like. The first example instead created a *public* negative externality, as everybody in the line has to wait longer. In

11. Stanley Milgram (1992) conducted an experiment by sending his students around with the instructions to cut in lines at ticket counters. In more than half of the cases, people reacted very negatively. Reactions ranged from dirty looks, to verbal protests, all the way to physical shoves.

this case there would likely be much social support for openly and loudly complaining, as opposed to the second case. When actions create public negative externalities, societies develop rules to curb these effects. Examples are rules that enforce cooperation or reciprocation, which are necessary to support social interactions. Without cooperation and trust, it becomes exceedingly hard, if not impossible, to sustain social exchanges. Yet there are other social rules (in addition to pro-social ones) that can elicit collective support. Child marriage does not seem to curb any particular, public negative externality. In a society where child marriage is the norm, waiting to marry off one's daughter will only produce negative consequences for the family and the unmarried girl, not the broader society. Yet witnesses to a contravention in such a society will feel entitled to blame, gossip about, ostracize, or pity the girl. The socially imposed *ought* is present in these practices, even if it is not borne out of a pro-social necessity.

I believe that the difference between rules that enforce prosociality and other sorts of shared practices stems from their origins. The latter may have evolved from simpler descriptive norms that, with time, acquired a special symbolic meaning (as I discuss further in chapter 3), whereas the former directly evolved from a collective need to guarantee a measure of social order. Once they are established, both kinds of rules ultimately share the same features that identify them as social norms.

Social norms perform a double function. They tell us that particular behavioral responses are warranted in situations that are sufficiently similar to each other: you do not cut in a line of cars waiting at an intersection, and similarly you do not jump in front of people queuing for a cab or waiting to be served in a pastry shop. Social norms also express social approval or disapproval of such behaviors—they tell us how we *ought* to act. Social norms are often called *injunctive norms*: what we collectively believe ought to be done, what is socially approved or

disapproved of (Rivis and Sheeran 2003). As in the case of descriptive norms, there are ambiguities in this definition, which may confound shared moral norms with social norms. For example, the moral codes a society or group shares prescribe and/ or proscribe specific behaviors, entail evaluations and judgments, and signal the mutual expectation that we ought to abide by them. Though some may argue that there really is no difference between social and moral norms, others would object.

My objective here is not to examine the nature of morality. All I want to call attention to is that there is an element of (social) unconditionality to what we take to be moral rules that is not present in social norms, in the sense that one's personal moral convictions are the primary motivator of one's actions, and such convictions overwhelm any social considerations. I am agnostic as to the existence of moral norms above and beyond the reasons people have to follow them. What I want to say is that—when we obey what we take to be a "moral" rule— we do not condition our choice on the behaviors and beliefs of other people, at least in principle. So fairness may be a social norm for some, but a deeply held moral norm for others. There is nothing about fairness that makes it moral, apart from one's view that it is a value that one should pursue as best as one can, even if one witnesses unfair behavior all the time.

From a purely descriptive standpoint, what we call "morality" is a code of conduct that guides behavior. Moral codes regulate the behaviors that a society considers to be most important, including behaviors that directly or indirectly affect others: rules against killing, causing pain, and deceiving are all examples of rules that prohibit causing direct or indirect harm.[12] Moral codes, however, differ among cultures, as they may also include rules of purity, honor, or loyalty that could conflict with what we

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12. These rules are often subject to exceptions. We might believe that we must not harm our friends, but it is acceptable to harm our foes.

take to be "do no harm" injunctions. Honor killing may be seen, by those that stand by it, as a moral duty. In this case, values of honor and purity supersede rules against killing. In fact, some cultures believe that the actions of a "stray woman" bring shame to her entire family, and this shame must be washed away with her blood (Feldner 2000). What matters here is that every society tends to "moralize" certain behaviors. This process of moralization happens at an individual level too, but is not uniform in its spread. When we say that a norm has been internalized, we often refer to the development of moral beliefs that correspond to societal standards. These beliefs become an independent motivation to conform, as deviations are often accompanied by guilt.

A norm that dictates female genital cutting (FGC) may embed important ideals of purity and honor, among others, and be part of the moral code of a group or society. For some individuals, this rule may be so important that it becomes (socially) unconditional. These individuals do not need to take into consideration the behavior of their peers when deciding whether to follow the rule. For other individuals, the choice to abide by the rule may be conditional on their social expectations. This is why I do not want to talk of moral rules in general, as if they had a status independent of the reasons of the individuals who follow them. Honor killing may be a social norm for some, a moral norm for others. All of that said, I can think of situations in which an individual who has moralized a rule may fail to follow it (and not because of weakness of will). Also moral rules can be conditional, but not in the same sense social norms are. Some moral rules are more important than others and take precedence in cases of conflict, and in some situations it is acceptable to abandon or adapt some rules. In a state of anarchy, one may conclude that harming and deceiving is the only way to survive, but one may do so with great anguish and guilt and still endorse (if not follow) general rules against harming and deceiving (Bicchieri 2006).

I mention here the strong emotion of guilt because it is often associated, as a moral emotion, with our commitment and conformity to what we take to be moral rules. Yet, as I have noted elsewhere (Bicchieri 2010), emotions are not a necessary hallmark of morality. One may feel guilty at openly choosing an unfair division of money, keeping more for oneself, but conveniently give nothing to an unaware party, provided it is plain that one's unfair choice is hidden (Dana, Weber, and Kuang 2007). Would we be willing to say that fairness matters when one is "watched," but that it loses its appeal when one can cheat in secret? It seems that a better way to distinguish, as far as we want to make such a distinction, between the moral and the social valence of the rule is to think of the ways in which we can justify its transgression. If I am willing to defend my unfair decision by pointing out that "others are unfair too," or that "I am not really expected to act fairly on this occasion," or even that "the other party will believe his misfortune was just bad luck," it seems clear that my choice was conditional on having certain social expectations. Fairness, in these examples, is not a moral norm to be followed no matter what.

The important point to be made is that we have (in principle) reasons for upholding what we take to be moral norms that go beyond the fact that we *perceive* them to be generally upheld *by a reference network* that may reproach deviance. Our commitment to these moral norms is independent of what we expect others to believe, do, or approve/disapprove of. Social norms instead are always (socially) *conditional*, in the sense that our preference for obeying them depends upon our expectations of collective compliance. This does not mean that we may not find good reasons to support some of those norms. There are many social norms that we may find socially beneficial, like rules of fairness or reciprocity, but I maintain that most people follow them because they know that they are generally followed and because they expect most individuals in

their reference network to keep following them. They also have reason to think most individuals in their reference network believe that they ought to be fair and to reciprocate in the appropriate conditions. In the absence of these social expectations, one may not reciprocate any longer, despite still believing that, in a well-functioning society, reciprocity should be the rule.

Like descriptive norms, social norms rely upon empirical expectations, that is, the belief that others in our reference network follow the norm. However, with social norms, the normative influence is strong and plays a crucial role in driving compliance. It matters to us that most people in our reference network believe we ought to conform to a certain behavioral pattern. This point must be emphasized. First, let me point out that people may think one ought to behave in a specific way for many different reasons. Parents who marry off their young daughters believe they are protecting them while simultaneously affording a good husband at a reasonable dowry price. Many Islamic countries require women to cover their bodies and faces, for reasons of modesty and family honor. Southern whites thought blacks should take menial jobs, to stress their alleged cultural and economic inferiority and ultimately to support a system that favored whites. A gang requires its members to wear particular clothes and colors to signal their group identity and show pride in belonging to that group. We think that trust should be reciprocated, because otherwise we would end up in a society in which very few transactions would occur. *For every social norm we may think of, we will find some reason why followers think it should be upheld.* When a norm is in place, we may or may not embrace what we believe are the reasons why the norm exists. In other words, we may be more or less *sensitive* or sympathetic to the norm's content.[13] Yet the social

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13. I shall extensively discuss the role played by norm sensitivity in chapter 5, when I discuss norm change.

pressure to conform, expressed in the social expectation that one ought to conform, is a powerful motivator. I thus define a social norm as follows (Bicchieri 2006):[14]

> A social norm is a rule of behavior such that individuals prefer to conform to it on condition that they believe that (a) most people in their reference network conform to it (empirical expectation), and (b) that most people in their reference network believe they ought to conform to it (normative expectation).

If others believe one *ought to* conform, the reaction to non-conformity may range from slight displeasure to active or even extreme punishment.[15] It should be clear that the *ought* is not prudential, because disregarding a prudential *ought* would not normally elicit a negative sanction. My friends may think that I *ought* to diet because being obese threatens my health in many ways. However, none of them would dream of punishing me because of my bad eating habits; they might tell me that I ought to stop, but this would be said out of concern for my wellbeing rather than wanting to put me "back in line."

14. I do not use "behavioral pattern" but instead talk of behavioral rules, for the reason that often norms proscribe behaviors, so we do not typically observe the behavior proscribed by the rule. It is also the case that a norm may exist but not be followed at a given time if the potential followers' expectations are not met (Bicchieri 2006, 11).

15. It is important to clarify that this imposed *ought* is normative in a strong sense, and not necessarily prudential. Other models, such as the theory of planned behavior (and its predecessor, the reasoned action approach; see Ajzen, Albarracín, and Hornik 2007; Fishbein and Ajzen 2011), do not make this distinction, and failing to do so can be problematic. The theory of planned behavior relies on the measurement of behavior-specific attitudes, "subjective norms," and perceived behavioral control to collectively predict behavioral intentions. The subjective norms in the model refer to individuals' expectations of the degree to which "important others" would approve or disapprove of their performing a given behavior (Ajzen 1991, 195).

The extent of the social reaction to a norm transgression varies, depending on how important or central to social life a norm is, how entrenched it is, and what sort of real or perceived harm disobedience creates. It is also important to acknowledge that many norms admit of variations in behavior and that the acceptable range of behaviors may be substantial, thus increasing uncertainty as to the scope of deviations and, consequently, the appropriate severity of sanctions.

It is often the case that norms are not "all or nothing" affairs. Fair divisions, for example, may include a 60–40 percent share as acceptable. Norms of decorum may tolerate slight variations in unkemptness (though up to a point). This quality of degrees of acceptability for a norm is well-addressed in the Return Potential Model (Jackson 1965). The Return Potential Model is a method of visualizing acceptable behavior as constrained by norms: on a Y-axis one would plot the amount of approval one could garner by engaging in an action, and on an X-axis one would plot the intensity or amount of a behavior being engaged in (see the example reproduced in Figure 1.1).

Despite having some predictive efficacy, the model's normative component falls short: First, the model always includes a normative predictor, regardless of whether or not the behavior being predicted is normative in nature. Second, the model does not take descriptive norms into account (a limitation acknowledged by one of the theory's founders; see Fishbein 2007). Finally, as mentioned earlier, the model does not appear to differentiate between second-order prudential expectations and second-order expectations of a stronger normative nature (Ajzen 1991). In other words, the model's normative measurements are too broad: when taking the approach of the theory of planned behavior, it will be impossible to determine whether a respondent believes that her peers believe that engaging in a particular behavior is wrong because it is unwise (i.e., wrong on a prudential level) or that it is wrong because it violates some shared rule (e.g., fairness). What I call normative expectations, rather than prudential ones, exert a greater influence on a decision maker when choosing whether to conform to a social norm.

For example, an individual with ten dollars in his pocket who is deciding how much money to give to a beggar might think that his friends (his reference network) will think he is selfish if he gives fewer than four dollars, but they will think that a gift of more than seven dollars is just foolish. Here, the individual assumes that there is a happy medium of donating between four and seven dollars that will garner approval from his friends.

In the plot one can identify a "point of maximum return," at which an individual will get the maximum possible approval out of an action. In the above graph, this point would be at 6 (or six dollars in the aforementioned example). The Return Potential Model assumes that norm-relevant actions can always either improve or damage one's reputation, which might not necessarily be the case (e.g., refusing to defecate in the open when in a
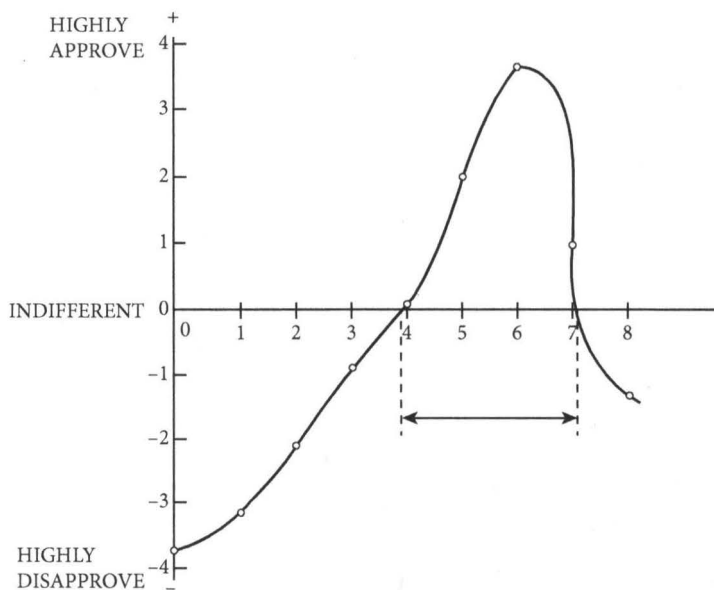
FIGURE 1.1 The Return Potential Model (reproduced from Jackson 1965).

Western society would not be likely to improve one's reputation, but engaging in it would certainly damage one's reputation).

Additionally, there is also a range of behaviors that are seen as acceptable: in the earlier example, a gift of between four and seven dollars was perceived to be acceptable. In Bangladesh, a father might think that marrying off his daughter below the age of seven is too young (she is just a child!) but marrying her off after the age of fifteen is too old (people might think she is having premarital sex if she gets any older). Similarly, each behavior can garner a range of approval or disapproval. That is, the height of the Y-axis demonstrates the intensity of positive and negative sanctions that norm-adherence or norm-violations incur. The Return Potential Model can also reveal how much agreement (i.e., crystallization) there is about a norm (though this is not shown in Figure 1.1): there might be disagreement about how important the norm is or about where the range of acceptable behaviors lies. The more disagreement there is on the importance of a norm or on what is considered "acceptable," the more disagreement there will be on what kind of sanctions are appropriate. The more people disagree on what sanctions are appropriate, the more uncertainty there will be about the sanctions' magnitudes and likelihoods.

As I shall discuss in chapter 5, the combination of punishment (mild, serious, or absent) and a person's sensitivity to the norm will determine individual compliance. Someone who is indifferent to or even disagrees with the norm's content will avoid conformity if no sanction is present, whereas someone who supports the norm will tend to conform even if no punishment looms. This individual will usually recognize that the request to conform is legitimate, and respond positively.

Normative expectations may also be accompanied by positive sanctions, such as liking, appreciation, trust, and respect. Again, the existence of strong positive rewards may move the indifferent and the contrarian to comply, but it will just reinforce the supporter's conviction. This is why norms that are (or are believed to be) onerous to follow are usually accompanied

by strong negative and positive sanctions: in a society in which cooperation or reciprocation with strangers is perceived to be difficult to obtain, an honest cooperator is praised, and a non-reciprocator will acquire a bad reputation. A culture that holds ideals of family respectability and honor, along with the beliefs that women are men's property, are weak, and are easily seduced, will impose strict rules of conduct on women and punish transgressions harshly. Honor killing is an extreme measure, but the reward is high status and social respect. Sometimes even norms that are not particularly onerous to follow, like a gang's dress code or other outward signs of belonging, are supported by significant sanctions, in that disregarding them defies the group's identity and signals disrespect. In the TV show *Sons of Anarchy*, a man who belongs to a motorcycle club is a "badass." Yet, "You know you're a badass when you'll strap down an ex-member and set his back on fire to remove his club tattoo."[16] Small, close-knit groups are particularly defensive about the norms that identify them, and are ready to punish deviators who threaten the very identity of the group.

Let me point out again that the cost of deviating from a descriptive norm, especially a convention, is very different from the cost of deviating from a social norm. Deviating from a convention, such as a linguistic one, is inherently costly to the deviating party. Once a convention is established, everyone does better by following it, especially when it is expected that everyone else adheres to it. Norms are not self-enforcing in the sense that conventions are. With a norm, there is often the temptation to transgress it—this is precisely why norms must be socially enforced. Without these systems of sanctions, the norm could easily fall apart.

16. In the show, the person had been required to remove his tattoo, and since he did not, they burned it off of him so no one would mistake him for a member in good standing. http://www.sidereel.com/posts/36137-news-missing-sons-of-anarchy-top-10-badass-moments-featured.

Here, my aim is not to draw a taxonomy of norms and accompanying sanctions, but rather to stress the relation of conditional preferences to empirical and normative expectations. I have argued that conformity to a social norm can be completely independent of attributing value to the norm one obeys. We may be induced to obey norms we dislike, or reject behaviors that we find perfectly appropriate. Often, however, especially with norms that are well established, norm followers tend to *value* what the norm stands for. An external observer may be induced to think that, since people have a positive attitude toward a norm, they may obey it *regardless* of what others around them do. Social expectations do not seem important anymore!

In fact, we may be tempted to explain why a given behavior persists by referring to the observation that most individuals in the network where it is commonly practiced share the conviction that it is good and valuable. We do not seem to be facing conditional preferences here: individuals behave in a similar way because they all think such behavior carries some advantage. Is this a correct conclusion? Recall what I said about causality. It involves counterfactual dependence: all other things being equal, if an individual did not have a positive belief toward x, she would not do x. What seems required is changing the positive belief alone. Information interventions failed at changing some negative practices, such as new mothers' refusal to breastfeed immediately after giving birth, because they missed the fact that people had social expectations and conditional preferences based on them. Information was introduced with the intention of changing factual and personal normative beliefs about the importance of immediate and continuous breastfeeding, the damages of giving newborns water (often contaminated), and the connection between infant mortality and traditional practices. Such interventions were not accompanied by the understanding that the practice was supported by widely held social expectations, both empirical and normative. Even if we were to succeed at convincing a young mother of the benefits of immediate breastfeeding,

would she dare incur the wrath of her mother-in-law, the scorn of other women, and the accusation that she was risking the life of her child? This problem is particularly acute in cases of *pluralistic ignorance* (a concept that I will explore later on).

I realize that it might be a bit daunting to keep track of the various factors that determine the nature of a collective behavior. Now that I have clarified the features of each collective practice (in terms of preferences and social expectations), I have included a visual summary of the diagnostic process of identifying a social norm and differentiating it from other collective behaviors in Figure 1.2. I will explore in the following chapter how we can reach a diagnostic conclusion through measurement.
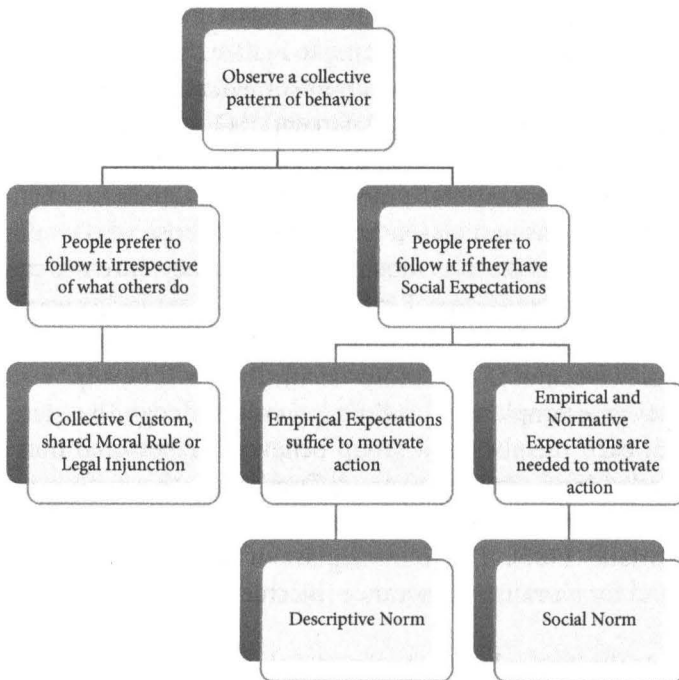

FIGURE 1.2 Diagnostic process of identifying collective behaviors. Source: C. Bicchieri, *Social Norms, Social Change*. Penn-UNICEF Lecture, July 2012.

BELIEF TRAPS: PLURALISTIC IGNORANCE

Consider the case of a social norm N present in a network G. We know the following:

1. All members of G believe that all other members of G follow N.
2. All members of G believe that all other members of G believe one ought to follow N.

However, it is not true that all members of G believe one ought to follow N. In fact, the majority of individuals dislike N and do not think one ought to follow it. In a UNICEF study about violence on children, it was stunning to realize that caregivers who report a negative judgment on punishment still punish in large numbers (country median: 50 percent).[17] One possible explanation for this disparity is that these caregivers observe corporal punishment, or corporal punishment's consequences, such as bruises, and have no reason to believe that those who conform to the norm dislike it as much as they do. They dare not speak out or openly transgress, for fear of being regarded as weak or uncaring parents. In this way a norm nobody actually likes will survive, and if deviations occur, they will be kept secret. This is an example of *pluralistic ignorance*, a cognitive state in which each member of a group believes her personal normative beliefs and preferences are different from those of similarly situated others, even if public behavior is identical (Miller and McFarland 1987). The following set of conditions is a fertile ground for pluralistic ignorance (Bicchieri 2006, ch. 5; 2014):

a) Individuals engage in social comparison with their reference network. We constantly observe what others

17. www.childinfo.org./discipline.html.

do, and from these observations we get clues about appropriate behavior, others' preferences, beliefs, and so forth. In the case of norms, we are influenced by the behavior of other network members, but we do not know the true distribution of their beliefs and preferences, which we try to infer from observing their behavior.

b) Others' behavior is observable. If not, then the consequences of such behavior are observable.[18]

c) No transparent communication is possible. Because of shared values, religious reasons, or simply the fear of being shunned or ridiculed as a deviant or just different, we do not express views that we think will put us at a disadvantage.

d) We assume that, unlike us, others' behavior is consistent with their preferences and beliefs. There are several possible reasons why this might occur. Fear of embarrassment or the desire to fit in are not easy to observe in others, so we may come to believe that we experience these emotions more strongly than others do. Another possible cause of the self/other discrepancy is the *fundamental attribution error* (Ross 1977): we tend to overestimate the extent to which others act on private motives (beliefs, preferences), while we instead attribute our own behavior to external factors (social pressure in this case).

e) We infer that all but us endorse the observed norm. We discount personal evidence in favor of what we observe and take it at face value.

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18. For example, compliance with norms that regulate sexual behavior or other unobservable behaviors can be assessed by observing the presence or absence of the consequences of such behaviors. In the case of norms that prohibit pre-marital sex, teen pregnancies would be a sign that the norm has been flouted.

All end up conforming to the public norm, oblivious to the possibility that they are participants in a group dynamic in which all pretend to support the norm, while in fact all dislike it.

In a state of pluralistic ignorance, individuals are caught in a belief trap and will keep following a norm that they deeply dislike. How long can this last? One may suspect that a norm that is so disliked would not be stable, since even small shocks to the system of beliefs that support it would lead to its demise. Once the frequency of true beliefs is conveyed to the relevant population, a change would occur. Such change may be feasible with a descriptive norm, but it is much more difficult to obtain in the case of a social norm.

Berkowitz and Perkins (1987; see also Berkowitz 2005) have taken advantage of the effectiveness of *beliefs shocks*, public revelations of pluralistic ignorance, when attempting to change maladaptive descriptive norms that are maintained by pluralistic ignorance, particularly alcohol consumption on college campuses. Their approach is designed to stop people from engaging in a collective practice by informing them that participation rates (typically drinking rates) are lower than they might appear. Such information serves to update a target audience's empirical expectations. This approach, when properly implemented, is effective at combatting descriptive norms that suffer from pluralistic ignorance (which are supported by inaccurate empirical expectations), but is not effective at changing independent practices, such as customs (if you inform people that fewer of their peers use umbrellas than they previously thought, why should they care?), or social norms, which are additionally supported by normative expectations.

Since a social norm is supported by normative expectations, it is not sufficient to publically disclose that most individuals

dislike the norm and would like to do something different. The participants must also be sure that its abandonment will not be followed by negative sanctions. People face a double credibility problem here: they must believe that the information they receive about others' true beliefs is accurate, and they must also believe that everyone else is committed to change their ways. There are many ways to achieve these goals, and there are several examples in the literature of successful changes of negative norms by means of information campaigns, public declarations, and common pledges (Bicchieri and Mercier 2014). Any successful change, as I shall argue in the last two chapters, must change both empirical and normative expectations, their relative order depending on whether a norm is being created or abandoned.

Whether we are facing pluralistic ignorance is an entirely empirical question. A few years ago, a friend from UNICEF presented me with the following data, confessing she was at a loss as to how to interpret them.[19]

She noted that in Sudan, Djibuti, and Burkina Faso there was a significant discrepancy between the prevalence of FGC and its support among women who would have been directly involved in getting their daughters cut. However, in places like Chad, prevalence and support were very much in line.[20] At the time, I knew that women were only questioned about their attitudes, not about their expectations,

19. The data sources in Table 1.3 are UNICEF global databases, based on DHS, MICS, and other nationally representative surveys. See more at: http://data.unicef.org/child-protection/fgmc.html#sthash.jV8FtLDS.dpuf.
20. It is important to notice that the 49.4 percent of women who supported the practice in Chad might not overlap with the 44.9 percent who actually engaged in the practice. In this respect, it is important to consider the strength of a social norm in a population. For example, we would have to

Table 1.3

FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING PREVALENCE VS.
SUPPORT OF THE PRACTICE AMONG WOMEN 15–49

Area name	Time period	Prevalence	Support	Dataset sources
Somalia	2006	97.9	64.5	MICS 2006
Guinea	2005	95.6	69.2	DHS 2005
Djibouti	2006	93.1	36.6	MICS 2006, table CP5.
Egypt	2008	91.1	54	DHS 2008, table 15.1, p. 197
Sudan	2006	89.3	23.7	SHHS 2006
Mali	2007	85.2	76	DHS 2006
Ethiopia	2005	74.3	31.4	DHS 2005, table 16.13, p. 253
Burkina Faso	2006	72.5	11.1	MICS 2006, table CP5.
Mauritania	2007	72.2	53.4	MICS 2007
Chad	2004	44.9	49.4	DHS 2004, table 11.1, page 170
Yemen	1997	22.6	41	DHS 1997

especially normative ones. It was possible that in Sudan women did not dare express their true preferences and beliefs and kept performing a ritual that was expected of them, without being aware they were not the lone deviants. It is also possible that women knew about other women's opinions, but were forced to perform the ritual, or that the practice was so ubiquitous that it had become naturalized and

consider the central tendency (that is, how strong the norm is) in different groups, as well as the norm dispersion (that is, how uniformly groups conform to the norm). Typically, a social norm is very strong where there is a clear and high central tendency and very little dispersion.

people did not even consider alternatives, even if they might not have had a strong preference for it. To know the reasons for the discrepancy, we must be able to measure normative expectations, and check whether perceived and objective consensus differ. Measuring expectations is precisely what I recommend doing in the next chapter, when I tackle the issue of norm measurement.

CONCLUSION

Many programs designed to curb the incidence of sexual behaviors that spread AIDS, induce people to build and use latrines, educate girls, or convince families not to marry off their very young daughters have failed. Program failures have taught us that causal factors that drive collective behaviors have to be addressed in order to change descriptive and social norms, and the first, most important step in a successful intervention is precisely to identify causal relations. I have maintained that experiments are the best way to assess causal relations. However, it may be very difficult to manipulate personal evaluations in an experiment.[21] What we can do is influence expectations about what others do or believe should be done (that is, alter normative and empirical expectations). In other words, if we were to believe that social expectations play no role in directing behavior, then altering them experimentally (creating or eliminating them) should not change the behavior of individuals who have expressed a positive evaluation (through a survey) of the behavior in question. I will return to this important point in the chapter on measurement. For the time being, let me remind the reader that the link between personal normative beliefs and behavior is not necessarily strong (Eagly and Chaiken 1993). People may *say* that they approve or disapprove of something, but when we look at their actions we often see no consistency with their evaluative judgments.

In defining social norms as I did, I have stressed the role of conditional preferences and social expectations. In other words, I have relied upon the *reasons* that make people behave

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21. We may give damning information about a company (it uses slave labor!) and thus change a subject's personal evaluation of that company, but it would be much harder to change personal evaluations about common, valued, and long-established practices.

as they do. Understanding these reasons is critical to instigating social change, as I shall discuss further in chapter 3. If we believe social norms have causal efficacy, we must be ready to show that, were the expectations that support a norm absent, the norm would no longer be followed. Since the preference for following a social norm is conditional upon having the right kind of social expectations, altering expectations should affect behavior in significant ways.

Again, experiments are the best means to check whether empirical and normative expectations matter to choice and under what conditions. Yet there are many situations in which experiments are difficult or impossible to perform, and we may have to fall back on surveys and vignettes to assess whether a norm is present and how and when it influences behavior. In the following chapter I shall provide tools for measuring norms and ways to check the causal pathways that link a social norm to actions.