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Norms

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norms Consensual standards that describe what behaviors should and should not be performed in a given context are called social norms. They prescribe the socially appropriate way to respond in the situation – the “normal” course of action – as well as proscribing actions to avoid if at all possible. Social norms, in contrast to statistical norms or general expectations based on intuitive BASE RATES for behavior, include an evaluative component. People who do not comply with the norms of a situation and cannot provide an acceptable explanation for their violation are evaluated negatively. This condemnation can include hostility, pressure to change, negative sanctions, and punishment, but the reaction depends on the magnitude of the discrepancy, the importance of the norm, and the characteristics of the person who violates the norm. Wearing too colorful a tie, not bowing properly when introduced, or talking about overly intimate matters with a new acquaintance may violate situational norms of propriety, but they will rarely earn public rejection. Small violations that reflect personal idiosyncrasies, if kept private, are often overlooked, as are violations committed by prestigious or powerful individuals. Violations of moral norms prohibiting theft or prescribing duties, in contrast, will be roundly condemned (Sabini & Silver, 1978). This evaluative reaction is, however, asymmetric. Whereas violating a norm often generates negative responses, merely complying with a norm will rarely earn one praise. A norm often becomes salient to interactants only after it is violated (Forsyth, 1990).

Some norms, such as taboos regarding incest and cannibalism, structure actions in a wide variety of contexts and cultures. Most norms, however, are more limited in their domain of application. Norms that regulate greetings and nonverbal behavior, for example, tend to vary from culture to culture or even within subgroups in a particular culture. A smile may be universally recognized as an expression of happiness, but *when* that smile can be displayed depends upon the display norms of the particular culture. These variations in content aside, normative processes affect all manner of social situations, from the informal and intimate to the ceremonious and

public. Spouses splitting up household chores, friends greeting on the street, executives discussing business strategies, and strangers in queues all recognize and respond in ways that are consistent with the norms governing that particular situation. Norms also structure action in situations that range from the commonplace to the consequential. Simple behaviors such as choice of clothing ("Wear shoes in public"), manners ("Say thank-you"), and conventions of address ("Call adult men 'Mr' ") reflect social norms, but so do general societal principles of fairness ("Do unto others as they do unto you"), morality ("Do not lie and break promises"), and value ("Avoid laziness").

NORMATIVE THEORIES OF SOCIAL PROCESSES

Norms are a fundamental element of social structure; they are the "cement of society" (Elster, 1989, p. 251). They simplify behavioral choices, provide direction and motivation, organize social interactions, and make other people's responses predictable and meaningful. Each person in society is restrained to a degree by norms, but each person also benefits from the order that norms provide. Moreover, although in some cases people may obey norms merely to avoid sanctions or to seem agreeable, when they internalize a norm it becomes a part of their total value system; hence people often follow norms not because of external pressure but because normative action is personally satisfying. Conversely, the violation of norms does not only carry sanctions from others. Individuals who violate norms that they accept condemn themselves as well, and experience a range of negative emotional consequences such as extreme self-consciousness, embarrassment, guilt, and shame (Elster, 1989).

Many theoretical explanations of social processes draw, either explicitly or implicitly, on the concept of norms. Why, for example, do people who are part of social movements or large crowds sometimes engage in aberrant behavior (*see* DEINDIVIDUATION)? In some instances people can become so aroused by the experience that the norms that typically govern their conduct no longer constrain them.

Hence, they act in odd ways. In other cases atypical norms emerge within the collective, and these emergent norms prompt people to act in uncommon ways. Emergent norms in urban gangs, for example, often emphasize toughness and physical strength, so when conflicts among members occur violence is the preferred means of settling the dispute.

Why do people help needy others (*see* HELPING BEHAVIOR)? Because the norm of social responsibility prompts individuals to aid people who can't help themselves. Why are people kind to those who treat them with consideration but aggressive towards those who treat them harshly? Because the norm of RECIPROCITY enjoins them to pay back, in kind, what others give to them: analyses of interpersonal conflict ranging from interpersonal disputes to global warfare suggest that violence escalates when the norm of reciprocity requires that aggressive actions must be countered with a more aggressive action. Why do people respond negatively when they are underpaid or they feel that they are putting more time and effort into a relationship than their partner is (*see* EQUITY THEORY)? Because the norm of equity defines a relationship as fair only if those involved receive an amount in return that is proportional to the amount they have invested. The relationship becomes inequitable when what is given does not match what is received. Why do people fall in LOVE? Analyses suggest that love is, to a large extent, defined by societal norms. Most Western societies condone long-term, exclusive relationships based on passion and commitment but negatively sanctioning short-term relationships between people who lack commitment. As these examples suggest, the explanatory power of the concept of norms is exceptional.

THE DEVELOPMENT AND TRANSMISSION OF NORMS

Norms, if written down, become formal rules of proper conduct, but in most instances norms are adopted implicitly as people align their behaviors until consensus in actions emerges. Sherif's classic analysis of this process suggests that this gradual alignment of action reflects the development of frames of

reference for behaviors and perceptions (Sherif, 1936). Individuals, once they join with others, rapidly structure their experiences until they conform to a general standard. This standard can be pressed upon the group by an outside authority or a group leader, but Sherif notes that in most instances norms develop through reciprocal influence. Individuals do not actively try to conform to the judgments of others, but instead use the group consensus to revise their own opinions and beliefs. Sherif examined this process by taking advantage of naturally occurring perceptual illusion called the autokinetic effect. People, when shown a dot of light in an otherwise dark room, will think the light is moving because the visual system lacks a frame of reference. Sherif arranged for men to state aloud their estimates of the distance the light moved when alone and in groups. He found that individuals making judgments by themselves establish their own idiosyncratic average estimates, which varied from 1 inch to 10 inches. When people made their judgments with other people, however, their personal estimates blended with those of other group members until a consensus was reached. By the final session, the men accepted a standard estimate in place of their own idiosyncratic judgments. Moreover, in subsequent individual sessions subjects still relied on the group norm, suggesting that they had internalized the norm.

Subsequent studies found evidence of both change in the individual and change in the group when a single individual who made extreme judgments was placed in each group. This individual deflected the rest of the group members' judgments so that a more extreme norm guided the group members' judgments. Once this arbitrary standard had been created, the individual was removed from the group and replaced by a fresh member. The remaining group members retained the large distance norm, however, and the newest group member gradually adapted to the higher standard. Old members were removed from the group and replaced with naive subjects, but the new initiates continued to shift their estimates in the direction of the group norm. The arbitrary group norm eventually disappeared, but not before the

group memberships had been changed five or six times (*see* Forsyth, 1990, for detailed references).

This process of **SOCIALIZATION** explains how norms, once they are established, can become part of the group's stable structure. Even though the individuals who originally fostered the norms are no longer present, their normative innovations remain a part of the organization's traditions and newcomers must change to adopt that tradition.

Socialization accounts for continuity in religious, economic, moral, political, and interpersonal beliefs across generations. Whenever children learn norms of appropriate behavior in their culture, new employees learn the boss's secret list of "dos and don'ts," or newcomers to a club discover the group's standards and expectations they are experiencing socialization. In most instances it is the individual who assimilates the group's norms, values, and perspectives (Moreland & Levine, 1982). At times, however, socialization can generate changes in norms as the group accommodates to fit the newcomer's needs. Moscovici's (1985) theory of minority influence similarly suggests that staunch, unyielding individuals can shift the group's norms provided they maintain the appearance of consistency and objectivity.

Newcomb demonstrated the intergenerational longevity of norms in his 1943 study of political attitudes. Newcomb noted that even though most of the students who entered the college where he taught came from politically conservative families, the upper-classmen tended to express more liberal attitudes. Newcomb, after examining students attitudes over a 4-year period, concluded that students' attitudes changed as they left the family group and joined the new group composed of classmates and faculty at the college. While the family's norms supported conservative attitudes, the college community supported only liberal attitudes, and many women shifted their political attitudes to better match the norm of liberality. Indeed, the shift towards liberalism was most pronounced among the popular students, those who were more deeply embedded in the university community, and those who were members of the most liberal subgroup within the overall

social organization. Individuals who did not become more liberal tended to be isolated from the college's social life or to be very family-oriented. The impact of this socializing experience was considerable, for the more liberal attitudes created by the group remained a part of the beliefs of many of the graduates some 25 years later (*see* Forsyth, 1990, for detailed references).

Many other researchers have documented this norm-transmission process. Crandall (1988) describes how bulimia – a cycle of binge eating followed by self-induced vomiting or other forms of purging – can be sustained by group norms. Bulimia is considered by society-at-large to be an abnormal behavior, yet it is prevalent in certain groups, such as cheerleading squads, dance troupes, teams, and sororities. Crandall suggests that such groups, rather than viewing these actions as a threat to health, accept purging as a normal means of controlling one's weight. In the sororities he studied he found that the women who were popular in the group were the ones who binged at the rate established by the group's norms. Also, as time passed, those who did not binge began to binge. Thus, even norms that counter to society's general traditions can establish a life of their own in small subgroups within that society.

THE POWER OF NORMS

Norms exert such a powerful influence on behavior that even individuals who privately reject their society's norms usually follow these standards nonetheless. Asch (1955) documented the too-human tendency to conform experimentally to norms by placing individuals into groups that were making incorrect judgments about the length of lines. All the group members save one were trained confederates who deliberately made errors to see if the subject would conform to a unanimous majority's judgments. Each group member stated his judgment aloud, so when the subject's time to speak came he could either report his own opinion – and disagree with the group – or conform to the group's opinion. Asch found that people conformed about 35 percent of the time – a surprisingly high rate

considering the simplicity of the judgment. He noted, however, that people who conformed did so for two different reasons. First, in some cases the individual's private position changed to match the norms of the group. They simply concluded "I am wrong, and the group is right." This form of social response to norms is termed *CONVERSION* or private acceptance. Others, in contrast, never accepted the norm of the group but they went along because they did not want to seem out of step with the others, anger the experimenter, or appear stupid. This type of conformity is usually labeled *COMPLIANCE*: a change in public behavior to match the norm paired with private rejection of the norm itself. But whether the individual was converted or merely complying, the result was the same: Conformity to the situational norm.

Why do we tend to feel, think, and act in ways that are consistent with social norms? Analyses of *NORMATIVE INFLUENCE* trace the source of a norm's power back to both interpersonal and personal factors. At an interpersonal level, people feel compelled to act in accordance with norms because a variety of negative consequences could result from nonconformity. Indeed, the interpersonal consequences suffered by people who violate society's norms are both commonplace and varied. Those who violate norms of civility are often reminded of their duty and told to change their ways. People who violate the norms and regulations of their groups are disliked, assigned lower status jobs, pressured to conform, and in some cases excluded from membership (as shown by the early research of Schachter, 1951; *see* Forsyth; 1990). Those who adopt alternative life styles or occupations are reminded that they should be ashamed for their variance from the normal path. The individual who publicly flaunts a moral norm, by acting in ways that society condemns, will likely meet with moral reproach: others respond by "telling him that he is doing something wrong, and exactly what it is that is wrong about what he is doing, and what it is that his wrong doing makes him – a cad, creep, or moral leper – or more simply just call him a creep for short" (Sabini & Silver, 1978, p. 103). And those who break society's laws – its legal norms – and are

caught in the violation meet with more formal sanctions: incarceration, monetary fines, public degradation, and even death.

Normative influence, however, also has a personal component, for people also obey norms in order to fulfill their own expectations about proper behavior. Norms are not simply external constraints but internalized standards; people feel duty bound to adhere to norms since, as responsible members of society, they accept the legitimacy of the established norms and recognize the importance of supporting these norms. General norms such as "Do not tell lies" and "Help other people when they are in need" correspond to such personal norms as "I don't tell lies to other people" and "I help people whenever I can." Thus, people comply with the dictates of situational norms not only because they fear the negative interpersonal consequences – ostracism, ridicule, punishment – that their nonconformity may produce, but also because they feel personally compelled to live up to their own expectations.

Milgram's (1992) studies of encounters between people in urban settings document both the interpersonal and personal consequences of counternormative actions. He sought to explain the high degree of social order that characterizes encounters between complete strangers in public places. Although these encounters are fleeting and relatively inconsequential, Milgram noted that they are for the most part ordered and predictable. Consider, for example, the waiting line or queue. Even though this group is comprised of individuals who are strangers to one another and who will likely not meet again, interaction within the queue is ordered by commonly recognized norms: do not break line; do not talk to the stranger next to you; face the front; move forward to fill spaces; and so on. These norms of civility are implicitly obeyed, and when they are broken members of the queue are ready to challenge those who try to violate the norm.

Milgram studied this process by arranging for men and women to break into queues waiting outside of ticket offices and the like in New York City. Working either alone or in pairs, the accomplices would simply say, "Excuse me, I'd like to get in here." and then

insert themselves in the line. The individuals in the queue defended the norms of the situation in nearly half of the lines studied. In a few cases they used physical action, such as a tap on the shoulder or a push. In some lines the reaction was verbal and ranged from the polite, "Excuse me, but I'm already in line here." to impolite, "Hey you SOB! The line's back there." In other cases the reaction was primarily nonverbal: the people in line used dirty looks, stares, and hostile, threatening gestures to vent their objections. More people challenged the intrusion into the queue by two individuals than by one, although hostility was partly tempered by location. Far more of the complaints came from people standing behind the point of intrusion rather than from people standing in front of the intrusion. Self-interest, as well as the normative force of the queues' rules, partly motivated people's reactions to the queue-breakers' actions.

Milgram also documented the personal consequences of violating norms. In one investigation he had men and women board a New York City subway and perform a simple counternormative behavior: asking someone for their seat. In this situation, all interactants recognize and accept the rule "all seats are filled on a first-come, first-served basis," so asking for someone to give up their seat is a norm violation. Still, many people gave up their seats, apparently because the request took them by surprise, they wanted to avoid interaction, or because they normalized the situation by concluding that the requestor was ill. Milgram was particularly intrigued, however, by the reactions displayed by the norm-violators. Even though they were volunteers who were deliberately breaking the situational norms in the name of research, all experienced severe emotional turmoil as they approached the situation. They "reported that when standing in front of a subject, they felt anxious, tense, and embarrassed. Frequently, they were unable to vocalize the request for a seat and had to withdraw" (Milgram, 1992, p. 42). Milgram, who also performed the norm-violation task, described the experience as wrenching, and concluded that there is an "enormous inhibitory anxiety that ordinarily prevents us from breaching social norms' (p. xxiv).

Norms, then, are not merely external forces that require certain kinds of actions in certain kinds of situations. Rather, they are a fundamental component of social structure that links each individual member of society to the larger social order. Individuals sometimes obey norms to avoid the sanctions that violations would provoke, but in most instances normative behavior is consistent with personal preferences, beliefs, and values. Norms exist independently of single individuals, but norms are nonetheless created by individuals in order to bring regularity to their social encounters. *See also:* SOCIALIZATION; DEINDIVIDUATION; HELPING BEHAVIOR; EQUITY THEORY.

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