

Social Norms

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Overview

In various literatures across social sciences there is little disagreement on the broad definition of social norms. Social norms are *common beliefs*, shared by members of a social group or a society, that prescribe socially appropriate behaviors or proscribe socially inappropriate behaviors (or outcomes) in specific contexts. When looked at from the societal perspective, social norms are devices that make it simpler for people to cooperate, coordinate, and work together on common goals that benefit their social group as a whole. Social norms are the glue that holds nations, societies, social groups, public and private institutions together, and are recognized in most social sciences as the main driver and motivator of human behavior.

The systems of definitions of norms and norm-driven behavior vary across social sciences and are often tailored to the specific subject under consideration (e.g., in human evolutionary biology, philosophy, sociology, psychology, economics, law, humanities). For the general overview provided in this article, it is thus worthwhile to adopt a functional classification that focuses on two most agreed upon properties pertaining to social norms: 1) a social norm is a belief *common in some group of people* (i.e., all people believe the same thing) and 2) social norms are *context-specific*, or synonymously context-dependent, and describe what ought to be done given the presence of some particular contextual features (e.g., there are norms related to dress code at a wedding and there are norms against hurting other people).

The typology of social norms along the first dimension describes *how the commonality of a normative belief is established*. Indeed, if social norm is a belief shared by some group of people, then it is important to understand how exactly this belief came to be shared in this group and how it gets promoted among the incoming members (e.g., children or newly joining strangers). There are two general ways of how norms or some forms of normative behavior can become common.

One strand of literature stemming from biology (e.g., Bicchieri, 2005; Henrich, 2016) suggests that normative beliefs can be learned from the (social) environment. For example, children can learn from their parents or school teachers that they should be respectful towards others and listen to adults; a traveler can learn local customs by observing behavior in a remote village; or a young adult, by listening to eco-activists, can learn that protecting the environment is important. By copying the behavior and opinions of others, people get to share common normative beliefs that make them behave in a way beneficial to the social group in question. In the literature, this phenomenon got to be known as *descriptive norms* (Bicchieri, 2005), or norms acquired from the observation of the environment (usually actions or opinions of others).

Notice that laws, religions, and various codes of conduct—as systems of normative beliefs crystallized in written form—are also included in this category since for any new member of a society they are given, fixed, and need to be learned. Typically, descriptive normative beliefs are established through learning and observation in *contexts that are often repeated* in a society. Thus, rituals, customs, traditions, and laws emerge around important themes in people’s lives like work, family, weddings, funerals, holidays, but also around theft, murder, and other forms of anti-social behavior.

Importantly, the *indiscriminate* mechanism of copying the behavior of others (typically those with higher social status) can lead to seemingly maladaptive practices, like for example footbinding in ancient China. This custom spread after its (probably idiosyncratic) appearance among the Chinese elite. Thus, the very mechanism of the emergence of descriptive norms can lead to strange or even dangerous behaviors that nevertheless can acquire moral connotation (e.g., as a part of social identity or values).

Another strand of literature rooted in moral philosophy (Hume, 1740; Smith, 1759; Mackie, 1982; Prinz, 2007) suggests that establishing the commonality of normative beliefs—in addition to descriptive channels—should also happen through, what can be called, *common psychological computation*. Indeed, traditions and norms copied from others are good in situations that happen periodically and in well-known settings. However, new, or unpredicted, contexts can often arise for which there are no established descriptive norms. Such contexts emerge, for example, in business transactions when profits should be divided somehow among (possibly idiosyncratically) unequal contributors, or in situations of extreme need when some natural disaster has destroyed livelihoods.

For example, a tribe of hunter-gatherers decide how to divide the meat of a deer among all families taking into account that some families have recently suffered from a forest fire; that the hunters have spent a considerable effort tracking the deer; and that there are several families with newborns who need more calories. In such unique situations, the specific *needs* of specific people become the factor that determines how the resources ought to be divided. People use *empathy*—or “fellow feeling” in the words of Adam Smith—to understand who needs what. Empathic feelings towards each family can be “computed” (by imagining the situation of that family and feeling how bad their need is) and “aggregated” across all families. The important part is that this process generates the *same* aggregated result when performed by each member of the society separately, given the commonly observed circumstances (e.g., fire damage, newborns). As a result of these separate, but identical, empathic computations, a commonly shared *injunctive norm* emerges that prescribes how to perform the division of the meat in a way that takes into account the needs of everyone (e.g., Kimbrough and Vostroknutov, 2023a). Empathic feelings towards others can be computed and aggregated in any context and can thus generate some common moral judgements (injunctive norms) in the group of people involved.

Given that the computation of injunctive norms can take time and requires information (e.g., about who is hurt how much by the forest fire), the process of deliberation and agreeing on the right thing to do can be long and fraught with various normative disagreements. In such cases, people sometimes resort to *moral rules* instead of injunctive norms to speed up the process. For example, a group of friends in a restaurant can decide to split the bill equally to save time instead of calculating who owes

how much exactly. Thus in various contexts, different moral rules (e.g., how to queue, how much to tip) can emerge that produce results close enough to the underlying injunctive norms (and thus agreeable by everyone), but that can be obtained quicker and without all the necessary empathic computations (e.g., Kimbrough and Vostroknutov, 2023b).

It is important to note that injunctive norms can also produce maladaptive results. This can happen, for example, due to different factual information: during Covid-19 some people believed that the virus is real and some believed that it is not. This led to different ideas about what ought to be done (e.g., some people thought that wearing masks is important and some thought that it isn't). Since injunctive norms are computed using some information about others, differences in information across people can lead to normative disagreements and even conflicts.

Along the second dimension, namely context-specificity, social norms can be classified by how *important* they are to some given social group or society. The violation of norms that are responsible for maintaining order and peace—for example, laws against murder and theft—are typically punished harshly in many societies with long prison sentences or even death. The norms prescribing or proscribing behavior in such important contexts are usually codified in important religious texts and laws of the land. This demonstrates that many societies put high value on orderly behavior and support for property rights. The violations of other norms—for example, showing up to work drunk—are considered less severe and are not punished as harshly because the society does not consider such violations too harmful (unless you are an airplane pilot). The violations of even less important norms (e.g., what to wear at a wedding) might not be punished at all. Thus, it is possible to tell what is important for the members of a society by looking at which behaviors get punished more or less severely.

Based on this classification, it is possible to distinguish societies depending on the kinds of prevailing norms. For example, small-scale, traditional societies rooted in kin relationships—where people encounter few, stable, predictable contexts—are often steered by traditional, descriptive norms to a very large extent. In such societies, the education of children is more focused on respecting and following the elders, family, social identity (values), and the gods. This creates a psychology where social identity and loyalty to family, leaders, or the “collective” (e.g., as in writings of Confucius) are pivotal and constitute the moral core of a person (Henrich, 2020).

On the other end of the spectrum are complex multi-ethnic societies with weak kin relationships—like Western liberal democracies—that often develop laws based on injunctive norms and the moral concepts of need of and harm to specific individuals (individualism) because contexts in such complex environments can be much more unpredictable. The education in such societies is more focused on thinking for yourself, but also on empathizing, respecting people's needs, and preventing harm. This creates an individualistic psychology though caring and respectful of the freedoms of others. Here the relevance of descriptive norms in the form of tradition, customs, social identity, or religion can be significantly decreased (Henrich, 2020). Undoubtedly, most societies are some mixture of normative beliefs consisting of descriptive (traditional) and injunctive (humanitarian) norms that might also not be equally spread in the population (e.g., the liberals and the conservatives).

Experimental Methods

Most experimental work on social norms and moral behavior has been done in human evolutionary biology/anthropology (e.g., Henrich 2016, 2020), sociology (e.g., Bicchieri 2005, 2016), psychology (for review see Gross and Vostroknutov, 2022), and economics (see for review Vostroknutov, 2020). Each field focuses on different aspects of norms, all of which are important. For example, one line of studies in human evolutionary biology and close fields like primatology is interested in how moral behavior develops in children (see for review Henrich and Muthukrishna, 2021) and primates (de Waal, 2006). Another research program related to anthropology, ethnography, but also economics, studies norms, traditions, and customs in small-scale, mostly indigenous, societies (e.g., Henrich et al., 2005).

The main focus of research in sociology is on the practical methods of diagnostics, measurement, and change of specific norms in specific communities (Bicchieri, 2016). In this literature, vignette studies are designed to understand the often complex amalgamation of beliefs that underlies certain (possibly undesirable) behaviors or practices (e.g., female genital cutting). The beliefs do not have to be necessarily moral, or conditional on what others think. In many cases, harmful traditions are based on individual habits and can be easily changed with reminders (e.g., washing one's hands). However in others, beliefs can be rooted in tradition (descriptive norms) and are harder to influence, since they are maintained by the copying mechanism. To test how sensitive norms are to outside information about past behavior or opinions of others, many experiments have been conducted where participants, before making a choice, are presented with some information about past behavior in the same context (e.g., Bicchieri and Xiao, 2009). Such experiments directly test hypotheses related to descriptive norms, namely that simple observation of others doing or getting something (without being punished afterwards) increases the moral acceptance of such actions and/or resulting outcomes.

A large experimental literature in psychology and philosophy studies *moral dilemmas* and tests the tenets of *deontology* and *consequentialism*, the two movements in moral philosophy with the latter claiming that only final outcomes matter for moral decisions (something reminiscent of injunctive norms where only needs of people are important), and the former suggesting that many other things—like, for example, the specific actions taken to achieve the goal—can matter for moral decisions as well (something reminiscent of descriptive norms where actions can gain normative meaning). Even though these perspectives are often considered in opposition to each other, various experiments with moral dilemmas—where participants are proposed to make a (hypothetical) moral choice between, for example, two or three people dying depending on the pressing of a lever—have demonstrated that both views are consistent with behavior in different contexts (e.g., Christensen and Gomila, 2012). This is also in line with the observations in other social sciences that both descriptive and injunctive norms play a role in human morality.

Experiments on social norms in economics evolved from experimental studies of the classical economic problem of redistribution of limited resources and related social dilemmas. The early experiments involving the Dictator and the Ultimatum games demonstrated that people do not simply follow the desire to maximize individual consumption value, but also take the interests of others into account and choose to lose money to benefit strangers in the experiments (e.g., Güth et al., 1982; Forsythe et al.,

1994). This account is broadly consistent with the idea of injunctive norms and empathy-based moral calculations that are performed in the specific contexts of economic games where, typically, some limited resource is to be divided among several individuals, or they need to cooperate to increase their wealth together (with the possibility of free riding). By now, economists have investigated social behavior in a large number of different contexts (or games), which provides a plethora of data to test theories of moral behavior (see for review Vostroknutov, 2020).

Another direction of experimental research on normative behavior is the development of new diagnostic tasks that can suggest what norms are being followed, how norm-following someone is, etc. One such task was proposed by Krupka and Weber (2013) to measure social appropriateness of different actions in a context. This Krupka-Weber Task is an incentive-compatible tool that allows to elicit *normative beliefs* about the prevalent norm in a population and has been used extensively in applied and experimental research. Another example is the Rule-Following Task by Kimbrough and Vostroknutov (2016, 2018). In this individual task, participants are asked to follow some idiosyncratic costly rule set by experimenters. It was shown that the proportion of money that participants choose to sacrifice to follow such a rule correlates with their adherence to norms in many other contexts. Thus, the measure coming from this task can be used as a proxy for *individual norm-following propensity*. Several other tasks have been developed to measure the distributions of normative beliefs (e.g., Peeters, 2019; Dimant, 2023) and can be helpful in social environments with a multiplicity of normative views (Panizza et al., 2024). More methods are also reviewed in Nosenzo and Gorges (2020). Together, some combinations of these tasks and experimental designs can be useful to measure norm-related parameters and normative beliefs in various populations.

Theory and Future Directions

Theoretical work on social norms consists of a variety of models and approaches across different social sciences that are typically tailored to answer specific questions on norms and normative behavior in specific contexts (e.g., Ostrom et al., 1994; Keefer and Knack, 2005; Bicchieri, 2006; Gavrillets and Richerson, 2017; Fehr and Schurtenberger, 2018; Acemoglu and Robinson, 2020; Root, 2020; Henrich and Muthukrishna, 2021; Gelfand et al., 2024). The approaches differ considerably and might be useful for researchers in specific, related fields where it is reasonable to focus only on one particular quality of norms. However from the general perspective, all these, now intertwined, research programs have already produced a single landscape that captures the complexity of human interactions on multiple levels simultaneously (e.g., child development, psychology, sociology, anthropology, microeconomics, institutional economics, macroeconomics) and can be thought of as a general framework for doing policy that can take into account all these levels.

Specifically, a synthesized view emerges that humans are a social species that operates by means of *institutions*, or groups of closely interacting people that share some common (societal) goals pertaining to the nature of the institution. For example, governments, elites, firms, religious organizations, social clubs, nationalities, families, relatives, criminal gangs, political parties, Star Wars fans are all examples of institutions. To achieve their common goals, all agents within an institution follow some shared

normative beliefs (what is appropriate within an institution and what isn't) that can be called "social norms" within the institution (also "packages of norms," Henrich, 2016). These norms can be descriptive (coming from some tradition or law); injunctive (determined by the arising needs of the participating agents); or some mixture of both. While institutions themselves can be seen as *networks of interacting agents* (Root, 2020), societies can be seen as networks, or an *ecosystem*, of interacting institutions with their own rules and norms that guide specific sectors of the economy (e.g., firms on a market, informal sector, or the elite). Thus, a society can be conceptualized as a network of institutions each of which is also a network of agents.

This synthetic view of human sociality can be very useful for research and policy since it allows to study various social phenomena on all levels from psychology to macroeconomics depending on the need. The new theoretical framework that emerges in economics and combines norm-following together with consumption value in the so-called *norm-dependent utility function* (Kessler and Leider, 2012) is a promising direction for future research that—in one mathematical framework—can incorporate many important elements from the picture drawn above. For example within this paradigm, Kimbrough and Vostroknutov (2023a) propose a model of injunctive norms in any context that explains many puzzling behaviors in experiments, and Tremewan and Vostroknutov (2021) show how to incorporate other normative beliefs (e.g., descriptive norms) into the utility function (see also Kimbrough and Vostroknutov, 2023c). On the institutional level, Robinson et al. (2023) use the idea of *moral agent*, who wants to follow norms and cooperate with others by maximizing the norm-dependent utility function, and model explicitly the networks of agents and how institutions can endogenously emerge and change on such networks. This suggests new ways to better understand our societies in times of change, to predict institutional transformations that happen in the world, and to decide on the policies that can help us to move forward together.

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