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Social Norms, Emergence Of

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Norms are important because they contribute to social order. Law (or the state) is one solution to the problem of order, the market another. Norms provide a potential alternative. Thus, norms may substitute for law and the market. In addition, norms may be related to law such that legal changes affect norms, which in turn may have unanticipated effects. Legal reforms that fail to take social norms into account, therefore, may not produce the desired results. Finally, norms themselves can be reflected in law. Norms arguably matter, both as an alternative to, and in conjunction with, law and the market. But just what are norms? Where do they come from?

Scholars use two approaches to explain norms and how they emerge, each associated with different assumptions about individual actors and each with different interpretations of the concept of norms. The first, called here the *individualist* approach, holds that people are purposive actors who weigh the possible consequences of their actions. Scholars who take this view define norms as rules that are socially enforced. They seek to explain how individuals produce norms and, in particular, why they sanction normative violations. The second, loosely termed here the *cultural* approach, sees individuals as meaning oriented and actively engaged in constructing their social lives. For these scholars, norms are frames that define how individuals see the world. The emphasis is on explaining how normative systems emerge, with little attention given to explaining social sanctioning.

Individualist Approaches

Individualist approaches identify several factors that contribute to norm emergence: people's interest in controlling a particular behavior, hardwired concerns that derive from our evolutionary past, and the structure of social relations.

Regulatory Interests

The dominant approach to explaining norms suggests that they contribute to group welfare. Functional approaches, which were popular in the past, explained [p. 1393 ↓] social phenomena by suggesting that they were “good” for the group. Recent rational

choice work, although relying on different mechanisms, also treats norms as solutions to social problems. This approach focuses on incentives. It suggests that when behavior produces externalities—that is, when it produces consequences not only for the actor but for others as well—those others have an interest in regulating the behavior. People want others to engage not in behaviors that hurt them, but in those that benefit them. When the consequences of the behavior and the associated regulatory interest are large enough, people will be motivated to sanction. Thus, for example, if cigarette smoke is sufficiently bothersome, an individual will prefer that smokers stop smoking and criticize them if they do not.

Both qualitative and experimental studies provide evidence in support of this view. Robert Ellickson, in his study of cattle ranchers in Shasta County, California, for example, found evidence that people enforced norms that contributed to group welfare. Experimental work similarly found that increases in the externalities associated with a behavior result in more sanctioning. While it is likely true as far as it goes, however, this approach does not explain all norms. It is easy to think of norms such as foot-binding in China, female genital mutilation in parts of Africa, and dueling, which do not appear to contribute to group welfare. Some norms seem to be damaging; others simply appear trivial. Furthermore, if externalities drive norms, people need to have information about the consequences of behavior. If researchers do not know what information people have and how they weigh the costs and benefits associated with particular behaviors, they will have a difficult time predicting norms.

Genes

A related approach derives from principles of evolutionary psychology. It suggests that norms are a product not only of current incentive structures but also of psychological mechanisms that evolved millions of years ago during what scholars call the *environment of evolutionary adaptedness* (EEA). In this view, scholars ought to focus on factors that would have been important in the EEA. Evolutionary psychologists attempt to determine what kinds of characteristics human beings would have needed in the EEA to survive and reproduce. Leda Cosmides, for example, conducted a famous series of experiments on human sensitivity to cheating. She found that people often got problems that were framed as logical puzzles wrong, but when the same problem was framed

in terms of cheating, people were very good at determining correct solutions. She concluded that the human brain has a domain-specific adaptation to detect cheating. If she is right, norms should emerge with regard to behavior that looks like cheating. Later experimental work by Ernst Fehr and Simon Gächter found that people have emotional reactions to free-riders and that those emotions lead them to punish the free-riders. Their findings were consistent with the view that human beings are sensitive to cheating.

This approach suggests that if behavior produces externalities but is not framed as cheating (or something similarly salient to the evolved human brain), a norm might not emerge. Because the EEA is not the same as the twenty-first-century world, psychological mechanisms that emerged in the EEA might produce norms in today's environment that do not contribute to group welfare, or that seem irrational if only current incentive structures are considered.

Relatively little work has been done linking the internal states that evolutionary psychologists study to socially enforced norms. However, theories of human values produced by evolutionary psychologists may provide fruitful avenues of research in the future. The challenge is to avoid telling “just so” stories about the evolutionary environment and producing a laundry list of domains that are salient to the human brain. A long list of potential values resulting from educated guesses may not advance general understanding of norms. A limited number supported by empirical evidence may provide a stronger base for theoretical development.

Social Relations

Another individualist approach to explaining norms focuses on social relations and metanorms. Metanorms are norms that regulate the enforcement of norms. In this view, people enforce norms because they think others will approve of their actions. People **[p. 1394 ↓]** want to show that they are good actors with whom others ought to want to interact. Therefore, for example, teenagers may make fun of someone's clothing not because they think it is ugly but because they think others think so. They punish the deviant to demonstrate their good taste to their peer group.

Christine Horne's experimental research provided support for the importance of social relations and metanorms. She found that when people are more dependent on other group members, they are more likely to react negatively to deviance. That is, when people care what others think, they are more likely to enforce norms, even if doing so is counterproductive when considered objectively. This approach leads to the interesting conclusion that people may enforce norms with which they do not personally agree. Social relations can even lead people to enforce norms when there is little, if any, benefit to either the individual or the group in doing so. Thus, norms may exist that detract from group welfare and that few support.

Damon Centola and colleagues argued that the metanorms approach also may explain norm diffusion and norm cascades. If individuals are part of a group that engages in a particular behavior, they may begin to sanction that behavior—even if such behavior is not seen as normative by the society as a whole. This process may lead to a domino effect in which more and more people engage in the behavior and are sanctioned for deviance. Eventually, the entire group may be enforcing and complying with a norm in which few believe. This logic implies that when people realize that others, in fact, do not support a supposed norm, it can change overnight. This may be one explanation for the dramatic changes in norms in post-Nazi Germany and post-Soviet Russia.

Characteristics of social relations help to explain why people enforce norms and, therefore, why norms exist. They do not provide much guidance, however, for predicting the content of normative rules. Some scholars who make social relations arguments go so far as to argue that any behavior may be the subject of sanctioning and, therefore, may become normative. This conclusion may be too extreme. Currently, social relations approaches must be augmented with one of the other individualist theories to predict which behaviors are likely to become subject to norm enforcement.

Cultural Approaches

Two kinds of processes fall within the cultural approach. One emphasizes negotiation, the other the frequency of behavior.

Negotiation

Some scholars see norms as socially constructed. Individuals are active participants in norm creation, not simply respondents to costs or hostages to their genes. Norms are developed and communicated through talk.

This does not mean, however, that norms are infinitely flexible or that there is no stability. Some constraints exist. For example, people do not act in a vacuum. Rather, they live in a world in which there are already existing rules and frames. Therefore, in a new situation, people need not start from scratch but may consider and negotiate whether one of a range of existing frames is applicable. This may involve drawing on existing frames to justify their behavior or to differentiate themselves from others.

Individuals with different life histories have different perspectives. Norms and their appropriate application in particular contexts are ambiguous. People, therefore, may disagree (knowingly or unknowingly) with what others think is appropriate. These disagreements may lead to trouble. If there is consensus, for example, that people ought to check their e-mail frequently, but for one person, *frequently* means several times a day and for the other a few times a week, then conflict is likely to arise. People will have to negotiate their differences and come to some agreement about how the more general rule applies in the specific instance. Because people want interactions to proceed smoothly, they will work to this end.

This view implies that people who seek to establish a new norm may be successful if they can frame the behavior of interest as falling within the scope of an existing norm. For example, Darren Hawkins argued that countries may have agreed to the international convention against torture because it was framed within the more general and already accepted international norms of cooperation and prevention of bodily harm.

The challenge for scholars taking this approach is to develop general predictive theories. The more “active” [p. 1395 ↓] one perceives actors, the less predictive the approach can be because more is left up to individual idiosyncrasy and situational variation.

Typicality

The most commonsensical explanation of norm emergence focuses on the typicality of behavior. Psychologists and sociologists emphasize the extent to which people imitate what others do. The higher the proportion of people engaging in an activity, the more likely the individual is to do so as well, and the more likely it is that the behavior will become normative.

The idea is that when more people engage in a behavior, it comes to be expected, and a sense of “oughtness” attaches to it. The behavior is seen as legitimate, deviations as illegitimate. People comply with the norm because it is part of the frame with which they view the world. They see the behavior as legitimate and seek to maintain their identity as a particular kind of person.

This kind of approach underlies sociological literature on organizations and institutions, which political scientists have borrowed. Organizational ecologists suggest, for example, that the larger the number of a particular type of organization, the more legitimate that type is. This legitimacy leads more people to develop new similar organizations. Similarly, new institutionalists argue that actors (including individuals, organizations, and countries) make decisions about whether to adopt a behavior based on its legitimacy rather than on its instrumental consequences. In other words, when enough actors engage in a behavior, it is seen as legitimate, and others mimic the behavior simply because of its legitimacy. Like the social relations research, this view also implies that norms can diffuse across a group regardless of their instrumental consequences.

The weakness of this approach is, of course, that not all typical behavior is normative. In addition, behavior can become normative even if it is initially uncommon. Thus, it may be that norms produce behavior rather than the other way around—this would explain why norms so often are associated with common behaviors. In addition, this approach says little about what the content of rules is likely to be. To the extent that rules depend on context and history, it may be difficult to make general predictions about the content of norms.

The Future

Many questions remain. Is it possible to make predictions about the content of normative rules—particularly if one sees actors as active participants in constructing social meaning? What is the relation between the two perspectives on norms, and is it possible to integrate their insights? How do conflicts between individual interests and between groups affect the norm-emergence processes? The future of research on social norms promises to be both challenging and exciting as scholars tackle these important issues.

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See also

- [Attitudes and Behavior](#)
- [Compliance with Law](#)
- [Cost-Benefit Analysis](#)
- [Culture, Global Legal](#)
- [Custom and Law](#)
- [Evolutionary Psychology](#)
- [Externalities and Social Costs](#)
- [Genes and Crime](#)
- [Informal Law](#)
- [Legitimacy](#)
- [Morality and Law](#)
- [Negotiation](#)
- [Rational Choice and the Rational Actor](#)
- [Social Change and Law](#)
- [Socialization, Legal](#)
- [Structural Functionalism](#)

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