

Introduction

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NORMS are cultural phenomena that prescribe and proscribe behavior in specific circumstances. As such, they have long been considered to be at least partly responsible for regulating social behavior. Without norms, it is hard to imagine how interaction and exchange between strangers could take place at all (this was a main point in Émile Durkheim's *The Division of Labor in Society* [1893] 1933). Among other things, they instruct people not to kill, not to injure others, to keep their promises, to abide by the Golden Rule, and so forth. That foundation of Judeo-Christian ethics, the Ten Commandments, is neither more nor less than an enumeration of norms. Just as sets of mutually consistent norms help regulate behavior, so sets of inconsistent or rapidly shifting norms—a state of affairs leading to Durkheim's famous *anomie*—are often regarded as a symptom, if not a cause, of social unrest (Berger 1998).

This is not to claim that norms must do all the heavy lifting. The state, of course, is also responsible for regulating behavior in modern society. Its principal instrument in this respect is the law. Although the law, too, relies on norms, legal norms are different from social norms. Legal norms are created by design—usually through some kind of deliberative process, precisely specified in written texts, linked to particular sanctions, and enforced by a specialized bureaucracy. Social norms, by contrast, often are spontaneous rather than deliberately planned (hence, of uncertain origin), unwritten (hence, their content and rules for application are often imprecise), and enforced informally (although the resulting sanctions can sometimes be a matter of life and death).

Despite their regulative role, the attention afforded to social norms has varied notably in the social sciences. In sociology and anthropology, social norms were celebrated by classical theorists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and by functionalist theorists of the 1950s. Moreover, a famous series of social psychological experiments carried out by Solomon Asch (1951), Stanley Milgram (1974), and Philip Zimbardo (Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo 1973) revealed, at least in part, the power of norms to affect individual behavior.

Once functionalism began to lose popularity in sociology, however, explicit discussion of social norms began to wane. Ironically, just when sociologists were losing interest in social norms, other social scientists were becoming intrigued with them. The growing influence of rational choice and game theory brought increasing attention to social norms in economics, political science, international relations, law, and philosophy.

The reason for this growing attention to norms is easy to discern. Phenomena like cooperation, collective action, and social order cannot readily be explained on the basis of the rational egoistic behavioral assumptions that are typically countenanced by rational choice theorists (see Hechter 1994). Hence, rational choice theorists have regarded these kinds of outcomes (or equilibria), however rare they may be, as a major challenge to their theoretical commitments. In their quest for explanations of these ostensibly problematic outcomes, social norms have come to occupy pride of place. Indeed, a large body of research suggests that social norms regulate such diverse phenomena as queuing (MacCormick 1998), fertility (Simons 1999), cooperation (Axelrod 1984; Taylor 1987), crime (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997), government effectiveness (Putnam 1994), and social order (Hechter and Kanazawa 1993).

Given this rekindling of interest in social norms, we felt that it was a propitious time to take stock of what is currently known about them.¹ Fortunately, the Russell Sage Foundation generously agreed to sponsor a series of workshops on the topic. As much less is known about the emergence of social norms than about their effects, these workshops were designed to emphasize the problem of normative emergence.

To this end, we convened participants employing different methodologies and theoretical perspectives from a variety of social science disciplines. Because research on social norms, such as it is, is scattered across different disciplines and substantive topics, we assumed that no one scholar could possibly be apprised of the current state of knowledge. It was therefore decided that the book should begin with critical reviews of existing theory and research on the emergence of social norms. Chapters were sought on the current status of norms in sociology, law, economics, and game theory, for the role of social norms is particularly central in these fields.² The authors of the chapters in part I of the volume were given a mandate to comprehensively survey recent research on social norms in their respective disciplines, to systematize existing theory, and to provide new insights. Thus the volume begins with critical reviews of the current state of knowledge about social norms in sociology (Christine Horne), law (Robert Ellickson), economics (Thraínn Eggertsson), and game theory (Thomas Voss).

These chapters suggest that consensus about social norms is limited both across disciplines and within them. To begin, the concept of social norm clearly means different things to different scholars. Basically, two

types of definitions can be distinguished in these chapters.³ According to the first, social norms entail a moral imperative—that is, a sense of oughtness. From this point of view, we identify as a social norm behavior that people believe ought (or ought not) to be performed regardless of its outcome for the agent. Dueling offers an example: a man who engaged in a duel was prepared to give up his life to salvage his honor.

The second definition is much less restrictive. According to it, norms are merely behavioral regularities that generate social expectations without any moral obligations. From this point of view, we identify certain behavior as a social norm if deviation from that practice results in costs being imposed on an agent (see chapter 4). For example, a person apprehended by a police officer is expected to behave respectfully. If he or she deviates from this expectation—by running away, for example, or by reaching for what the police suspect might be a concealed weapon—the police are likely to react with force (Dan Barry, “What to Do If You’re Stopped by the Police,” *New York Times*, February, 27, 2000).

Violating any kind of social norm makes one vulnerable to sanctioning. Norms of the first type—what could be called “oughtness norms”—however, differ from regularity norms in one important respect. Because the violator is likely to have internalized this kind of norm, sanctioning is not contingent on detection. Violation of an oughtness norm is likely to entail some internal sanctioning—the experience of guilt or shame. Clearly, then, oughtness norms do a better job of controlling behavior than regularity norms.

As there is no common definition of social norms, there can be little agreement about how to measure them. Part II of this volume contains most of the measurement procedures currently being employed in the empirical analysis of social norms, as well as some novel ones. Evidence about norms is provided by ethnographic methods (chapter 5), content analysis (chapter 6), questions from factorial surveys (chapter 8), historical analysis (chapter 7), and experiments (chapter 8).

Despite this definitional and methodological diversity, a good deal is known about the effects of social norms. Much less clear, however, are the conditions responsible for their emergence.⁴ Because of the dearth of empirical research on the emergence of social norms, much of the relevant literature is speculative.⁵ In this regard, one speculation in particular—the instrumental theory of normative emergence (chapter 8)—has gained wide currency. According to the instrumental theory, norms tend to emerge to satisfy demands to mitigate negative externalities or to promote positive ones. Instrumental theorists certainly do not maintain that all imaginable socially desirable norms will emerge, however. Their claim is much more limited—to wit, that the norms that actually do emerge are likely to be socially beneficial.

Although the instrumental theory is increasingly popular, it has come

under attack. Critics (Rawls 1971; Elster 1999) argue that it is too rosy, on the one hand, and too bloodless, on the other: too rosy because it fails to anticipate the existence of malign norms like the duel, the feud, and the vendetta, too bloodless because it ignores the emotional bedrock that gives norms what the critics regard as their exceptional regulatory power.

By analyzing the emergence of a number of specific real-world norms, the chapters in part II shed considerable light on the adequacy of the instrumental theory. Gary Alan Fine begins this section of the volume with an ethnographic analysis of the social norms that have emerged among members of the Minnesota Mycological Society. This is a voluntary association made up of a variety of different kinds of nature lovers—amateur mycologists, photographers, and people who enjoy collecting mushrooms to eat them. Among other things, Fine asks how these naturalists can engage in activities that damage the environment they are ostensibly committed to protecting from human depredation. He argues that they do so by minimizing the extent of the harm they cause the environment and by distinguishing themselves from others who do more damage. In this way, Fine explains how a social norm becomes modified. In Fine's view, social norms are part of a negotiated order in which meanings are context bound rather than fixed. Hence, to a greater or lesser degree, social norms are ambiguous; they are inherently subject to modification and instrumental manipulation.

Michael Schudson then provides a historical account of the emergence of the norm of objectivity among American journalists. Journalists play a key role in democratic societies, for more than people in other professions they can provide the information that makes it possible for the electorate to hold their elected representatives accountable. Schudson argues that this norm—which obliges reporters to separate facts from values and to report on the facts alone—is most highly developed in American journalism. The norm did not suddenly appear; rather, it emerged gradually, beginning in the late nineteenth century. The story of the development of this norm is far from straightforward, however; as Schudson shows, the history of the norm is shrouded in mystery. (The chapter leads one to suspect that much the same is true about the emergence of many other social norms.) Schudson seeks to explain why the norm of objectivity is so much more salient in this country than in the European democracies. He contrasts the relative merits of technological explanations of the emergence of the objectivity norm—which claim that new developments in communications technology made it easier for stories to be checked and hence increased reporters' accountability to editors—and institutional explanations of its emergence, finding greater merit in the latter perspective.

Michael Hechter and Elizabeth Borland next consider the merits of an institutional explanation of the emergence of another norm—national self-determination—relative to an instrumental alternative. National self-deter-

mination as a norm has two parts: it holds that citizens should have the right to choose their own government and also to determine their own collective identity. Although norms that emerge among journalists and mushroom collectors usually do not have life-or-death consequences, the same cannot be said for the norm of national self-determination. Indeed, instantiation of this norm—in the form of current secessionist conflicts—is responsible for much of the political violence occurring in the world today (Gurr 1993; Gurr and Harff 1994). Hechter and Borland trace the emergence of this norm from the American and French Revolutions, showing how it has been applied in the wake of the dismantling of territorial (Austro-Hungarian, Ottoman, and Soviet) and colonial (British, French, and Portuguese) empires. Although the norm has a quasi-legal status—it is enunciated in the charter of the United Nations—key elements of the norm are ambiguous, as Hechter and Borland demonstrate. This ambiguity is revealed in the empirical record: for the most part, application of the norm has been restricted to external colonies rather than to internal ones or national minorities. In opposition to an institutionalist view that sees the diffusion of norms regarding human rights occurring universally, driven by processes of legitimation, Hechter and Borland argue that this ambiguity enables the most powerful actors in the international system to employ the norm of national self-determination for their own strategic purposes.

Karl-Dieter Opp then discusses the role social networks play in the emergence of norms that oblige people to participate in protest events. He suggests a two-step explanation of normative emergence. The first step provides propositions about conditions that increase the likelihood of the emergence of a given norm. The second explains the mechanisms chosen by actors interested in establishing the norm. Opp regards social norms as second-order public goods that are most likely to emerge when they are instrumental for the attainment of group goals. In his view, a given norm tends to emerge when individuals' perceived efficacy is high and when establishment of the norm is supported by strong positive selective incentives. This view suggests that social networks have no necessary implications for the emergence of norms. Instead, the relation between networks and norms is mediated by positive incentives that are often by-products of social networks. Moreover, norms often arise spontaneously from the informal enunciation of normative statements and sanctioning in the course of organizing collective action. These propositions are then subjected to a test on the basis of evidence drawn from a panel study conducted in East Germany in 1993 and 1996. Many of Opp's propositions are confirmed in the subsequent analysis.

Satoshi Kanazawa and Mary Still apply evolutionary psychology to the analysis of marriage norms—in particular, those mandating monogamous as against polygynous marriage. Although evolutionary psychology aims to explain individual cognition and behavior, the authors argue that it

can also serve as a foundation for a macro-level theory of the emergence of regularity norms. Kanazawa and Still make a distinction between consensual norms (those that prescribe behavior that people are likely to engage in anyway) and imposed norms (those that prescribe behavior that people would not otherwise engage in), arguing that evolutionary psychology can explain the emergence only of the former. Their analysis of international data suggests that marriage norms at the macro level reflect the choices that women make independently to marry either monogamously (when resource inequality among men is small) or polygynously (when such inequality is large).

Next, Christine Horne seeks to determine the relative merits of two general approaches to explaining the emergence of social norms. Behavior-based explanations suggest that norms essentially ratify preexisting behavioral regularities. Externality-based explanations, in contrast, suggest that norms largely arise to overcome negative externalities or to promote positive ones in well-defined groups. She applies these theoretical perspectives to explain norms that regulate female sexual behavior in parts of Africa and concludes that an externality-based approach can best explain the very different norms that obtain there. Horne then uses these two general perspectives to develop contrasting predictions regarding controller-selection norms and then tests them experimentally.

Although the chapters are substantively diverse, most of them advert, either positively or negatively, to the instrumental theory of the emergence of norms. The view that norms are created to prevent negative externalities, or to promote positive ones, is virtually canonical in the rational choice literature. Hechter and Borland treat states as collective actors, and the instrumental interests of these states are a factor—if not the sole factor—responsible for application of the norm of national self-determination. Horne's behavior-based approach assumes that a behavior may lead to a norm in part "because individuals value consistency and prefer that others behave in predictable ways." Kanazawa and Still argue that one factor, among others, responsible for the emergence of marriage norms is women's interest in increasing their material welfare.

Although Fine and Schudson can hardly be considered advocates of rational choice, much of the material in their chapters also suggests that social norms are, at least in part, instrumental. Fine's mycologists are intensely interested in mushrooms and understand full well that this interest conflicts with norms they also hold about the sanctity of the environment. This conflict leads to social pressure, cognitive dissonance, and the search for justifications.

Fine also discusses another norm that keeps the mushroomers from maximizing their haul. He notes that mushrooming is competitive: "The mushroom that I pick, you cannot." This suggests that the mycologists are faced with a negative externality. In this instance, the norm "First come,

first serve" might be applied; however, this solution is likely to breed strain in the mushroomers' community; thus emerges a "need to tame competition." Why? Their desire to maintain good personal relations is inconsistent with untrammelled competition. Thus, the emergence of a norm about constraining the collection of mushrooms arises from the group's conflicting interests.

Schudson argues that the objectivity norm in American journalism also depends on the interests of individual actors. For example, one such interest is the group's desire to "celebrate itself" and to define itself in relation to other groups. In exploring why the norm of objectivity is less accepted in Europe than in the United States, Schudson finds that American journalists were motivated by a "desire to distinguish themselves from public relations practitioners [that] was absent in Europe." If that is the case, then the objectivity norm served the interests of journalists. Note, however, that this is not the only factor that accounts for the emergence of the norm.

The contributions in part II do not refer to anything like a representative sample of all important social norms. Only a few of these case studies concern norms of the highest salience—such as dueling, honor killing, foot binding, and genital mutilation. Such norms impose the greatest costs on the individuals who are subject to them. In comparison, some of the norms discussed in this section (those regarding mushrooming, political protest, and objectivity in journalism) have much less salience. Others, however—norms about marriage and national self-determination—are indeed highly salient. Although we would have welcomed more studies of high-salience norms, the study of such extreme norms in a disciplined fashion presents grave obstacles to academic researchers (see, however, Cohen and Nisbett 1997).

Part III moves from case studies to theory construction. Two chapters outline new theoretical perspectives on norm emergence. Karen Cook and Russell Hardin (chapter 11) discuss how social norms and social networks work together to resolve the problem of mutual assistance. They argue that the small community works through quasi-universal norms that cover many different aspects of potential cooperation. In contrast, urban society works through networks of ongoing relationships embedded within a much larger context. Because any given urban network is partial—in that it covers only a particular realm of potential cooperation—participants are each involved in many quite different networks. Cook and Hardin focus on the norm of communal cooperativeness, arguing that it does not appear to generalize to more diffuse urban contexts.

Guillermina Jasso argues that human beings are, by nature, rule makers, and that the characteristics of their norms grow out of the operation of basic social processes. She shows how comparison theory—a general, axiomatic theory—can be used to study the emergence of norms concerning theft. The theft illustration yields a variety of testable predictions. A small sample of these includes the following:

1. The rule, "Thou shalt not steal," is not likely to arise in homogeneous societies because most of the population is indifferent to theft. Nor is it likely to emerge in heterogeneous societies because there are strong factions both in support and in opposition.
2. A homogeneous society quickly embraces the rules, "Never steal from someone poorer than yourself," and "When stealing from someone richer than yourself, never leave him or her poorer than you were before the theft."

This volume concentrates on social norms, not on law and lawmaking. There is no question that law is a kind of norm, as indicated above; and the emergence of law is a highly controversial subject (see n. 3). This volume confines its attention to social norms largely out of practical considerations. The emergence of law is treated in a number of far-flung literatures—including jurisprudence, the sociology of law, public administration, and rational choice theory, among others. To do the topic justice would require an entirely new volume and quite a different set of contributors. For all these reasons, we limited the scope of the volume to social norms alone.

When this volume was initially planned, it was hoped that the case studies in part III would systematically relate to the general theoretical chapters in part I by applying, extending, or modifying the theories presented therein. In retrospect, this appears to have been a utopian objective. For better or worse, the literature on social norms consists of a loose collection of mostly independent propositions that are scattered in the literatures of various disciplines. As the chapters in part I indicate, no adequate theory of the emergence of social norms can be said to exist at this juncture. Given the present state of the art, the best that could be hoped for is a set of rather loose connections between the theoretical chapters and the case studies. Moreover, these case studies are substantively informative in their own right. It is interesting to learn how the norm of objectivity arose in American journalism and how the right of self-determination emerged as an international norm. Thus, the case studies represent the current state of interdisciplinary knowledge about a number of specific norms.

The volume as a whole comprises a set of literature reviews, empirical studies, and theories about the emergence of social norms. As such, it probably offers the most comprehensive critical overview currently available of this complex and multifaceted subject. Even so, many questions remain unclear. In the conclusion, we highlight the principal points of agreement and contention in the preceding chapters, paying particular attention to the status of the instrumental theory. In addition, we discuss some of the fundamental issues that have to be faced in explaining normative phenomena and point toward an agenda for future research.

Notes

1. Another indication of the increasing centrality of social norms can be found in the many “new institutionalisms” that are presently flourishing in economics, political science, international relations, and sociology.
2. Our attempts to find an anthropologist willing to participate in this enterprise came to naught. Although the working group had one political scientist (Russell Hardin), reviews were not solicited in either political science or international relations. Interest in norms is also strong in philosophy, but we purposely confined our attention to the more empirical social science disciplines.
3. It is notable that a similar distinction has been made about legal norms. Legal positivists have argued that legal norms need have no moral foundations, whereas the advocates of natural law have taken the opposing view. Recently, the distinctions have become much more complex; see, for example, *Legal Theory* 6, no. 1 (2000).
4. This point can be illustrated by considering some of the reactions to Robert Putnam’s (1994) highly influential book, *Making Democracy Work*. Building on themes first explored in Edward Banfield’s *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (1958), Putnam provides extensive documentation that civic norms in northern and southern Italy are as distinct from one another as night from day, and that these normative differences are associated with striking variations in economic development and government performance (northern Italy clearly outstrips the Mezzogiorno with respect to each). Like Banfield before him, Putnam argues that civic norms are responsible, at least in part, for the starkly varying fates of these two Italian regions. Yet the origins of these norms are as mysterious for Putnam, writing in the 1990s, as they were for Banfield in the 1950s (Goldberg 1996; Levi 1996; Tarrow 1996).
5. Jon Elster (1999, 405) argues that the regulatory power of norms is fundamentally emotional. Consequently, the best evidence about emotions, he claims, is to be found in works of history, anthropology, fiction, and philosophy. It is doubtful, however, that these sources of evidence can contribute much to an analysis of social norms. More likely, the kinds of evidence that can be garnered from anthropologists’ and novelists’ thick description lead to the “just-so stories” that Elster so frequently disparages in many of his other writings.

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