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Norms: An Integrated Framework

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Abstract

Norms are a foundational concept in sociology. Following a period of skepticism about norms as overly deterministic and as paying too little attention to social conflict, inequalities, and agency, the past 20 years have seen a proliferation of norms research across the social sciences. Here we focus on the burgeoning research in sociology to answer questions about where norms come from, why people enforce them, and how they are applied. To do so, we rely on three key theoretical approaches in the literature—consequentialist, relational, and agentic. As we apply these approaches, we explore their implications for what are arguably the two most fundamental issues in sociology—social order and inequality. We conclude by synthesizing and building on existing norms research to produce an integrated theoretical framework that can shed light on aspects of norms that are currently not well understood—in particular, their change and erosion.

NORMS

Norms are fundamental to social life. They can maintain social order, discouraging antisocial behavior and acting as the “soft guardrails” necessary for democracy (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2019, p. 9). They can catalyze positive social change, discouraging harmful behaviors such as violence and encouraging constructive behaviors such as those that improve health. But norms can also cause destructive behavior, maintain inequalities, and exacerbate social conflict. Norms cover many domains from the moral to the pragmatic to the mundane, from violence to walking down the street to clothing styles. Scholars in economics, anthropology, psychology, political science, law, philosophy, and other fields, studying topics as diverse as family, crime, health, culture, and politics, are interested in norms. Here we focus primarily on recent sociological research.

Norms matter for sociologists because they are relevant for two fundamental issues in the discipline: order and inequality. Social order refers to cooperation that achieves collective ends (Hechter & Horne 2009). In societies with high levels of social order, people contribute to the collective good and avoid behaviors that harm others. Understanding the conditions and mechanisms contributing to order is a long-standing focus of sociologists (e.g., Durkheim 1951, Weber 1978). Inequality refers to variations in the distribution of resources, status, and power. Researchers investigate axes along which inequalities occur and the factors and mechanisms that produce and maintain them. Social norms have implications for both.

WHAT ARE NORMS?

We define norms as group-level evaluations of behavior. People apply (negotiate, interpret, and manage) norms in particular contexts. The evaluation aspect of norms is straightforward. It refers to approval or disapproval. The group-level aspect is more complex. Whereas individuals can hold evaluations in their minds, it is unclear where groups hold evaluations. One way to think about the collective nature of norms is to conceptualize it as widespread expectations that others approve or disapprove of a behavior, sanction it, and view such sanctions as legitimate (Coleman 1990). Scholars thus generally treat norms as having two components: the content of the evaluation and its enforcement. In addition to explaining content and enforcement in the abstract, researchers examine how substantive norms are applied in context.

Norm content refers to positive or negative assessments of behaviors. Norms can be prescriptive or proscriptive and can vary in strength. Norms can discourage or forbid; they can also tolerate, encourage, or require. Norm enforcement refers to social sanctions—the extent to which people react differently to those who engage in a behavior than to those who do not. Sanctions include punishment of violations and rewards for compliance. Because content and enforcement are affected by different factors and mechanisms, researchers often focus on one or the other. Norm application refers to how people manage norms in particular situations. Norms (like laws) are relatively general—one should be honest or shake hands when meeting someone new. But they are applied in concrete situations involving specific individuals with particular characteristics who face varying trade-offs. Is it sometimes acceptable to lie to a friend or avoid shaking hands with a job applicant who has a cold? Because norms are conditional, understanding them requires explaining how people negotiate, interpret, and apply them in different situations.

Norms regulate behavior broadly—actions, emotion expressions (e.g., Heise & Calhan 1995, Hochschild 1979, Rose et al. 2006, Thoits 2004), portrayals of one’s behavior to others (Mollborn 2017), and justifications (the explanations people give for their behaviors; Swidler 1986, Vaisey 2009). Metanorms—norms regulating how to enforce norms—prescribe the type and severity of appropriate sanctions for a given behavior (Horne 2009). Norms and metanorms are undergirded by rationales that explain why one ought to adhere to them (Mollborn 2017). Norms (and the

rationales underlying them) can be conscious and explicit or unconscious and invisible to the individual, who may not recognize the influence of norms on their behavior. Norms can regulate individuals, groups, organizations (e.g., DiMaggio & Powell 1983), or states (Björkdahl 2002). Here, we focus on norms regulating individuals.

Norms overlap with, are related to, and are conflated with other concepts. Norms are not simply prevalent behaviors (for related discussion, see Bell & Cox 2015, Marini 1984). Statistical regularities in behavior capture what most people do. Descriptive norms capture people's perceptions of what most people do (Cialdini & Trost 1998). Descriptive norms and norms can operate independently (Compernelle 2017). Statistical regularities and descriptive norms can also produce (Horne et al. 2018b) or result from norms (Eriksson et al. 2015).

Norms are not attitudes or values, though norms can be internalized to become part of an individual's value system. The fact that an attitude or value is widely held does not make it a norm. Rather, norms exist when people have expectations about how others evaluate behaviors. In many US social groups, norms discourage cigarette smoking. It is not simply that individuals personally object to it. What makes antismoking evaluations normative is that people know that others object, violations are punished, and sanctions are socially accepted. Norms and values can be consistent when norms are internalized, becoming part of an individual's value system (norms encourage honesty, and individuals may also personally value it), but they can also be contradictory (norms can encourage support for color blindness even as individuals maintain racial biases). Attitudes, values, and norms all affect behavior but do so through different mechanisms. Attitudes and values are enforced through an individual's own guilt or shame (an individual may feel uncomfortable if they lie), whereas norms are enforced through social sanctions (social ostracism for betraying a friend). When internal states and norms are consistent, self-imposed internal sanctions support socially enforced norms.

Norms are not laws (which are enforced by states) or rules (enforced by organizations). Rather, norms are socially enforced through groups and network ties. Norms, organizational rules, and laws may be contradictory. For example, laws may forbid bribery even as norms allow it. They may also be consistent: Norms, organizational rules, and law all forbid stealing. And these different kinds of rules may affect each other.

Finally, norms have important connections to culture. Culture encompasses norms but also other related concepts, including beliefs, values, meaning, frames, schemas, and scripts (Frye 2017, Hitlin & Piliavin 2004, Ridgeway 2011, Schalet 2011). Concepts such as heteronormativity (e.g., Schilt & Westbrook 2009) and doing gender (e.g., West & Zimmerman 1987) emphasize the interplay between norms and human agency.

HOW CAN WE KNOW IF A NORM EXISTS?

The collective nature of norms makes them difficult to measure. Researchers studying the content of norms often focus on normative expectations, using surveys and vignette experiments to ask people how much they expect others to approve or disapprove of a behavior (e.g., Horne et al. 2013). Related measures include whether people would be embarrassed if others found out about a behavior (presumably because they expect negative reactions). Expectation and embarrassment measures can be aggregated to produce indicators of a group's norms and consensus around norms (e.g., Mollborn et al. 2014). Some researchers examine differences in how people behave across social groups (Giordano et al. 2006) or between people's public and private behaviors (Willer et al. 2009). If people behave differently in private than in public, it suggests that they personally prefer a particular behavior but expect that others do not approve and shift their public behavior to conform to the norm.

Researchers studying norm enforcement typically focus on factors and mechanisms that affect sanctioning. In lab studies, sanctions often involve people awarding or taking away points in computer-mediated interactions. Researchers assess conditions under which people take points from others (e.g., Horne 2009, Rauhut & Winter 2010). Lab-based sanctions are often material—points that translate into money. But sanctions can be nonmaterial, such as loss of social status (Willer 2009). Nonmaterial sanctions occur frequently in the field.

Researchers assessing substantive norms in particular situations use a range of methods. Survey measures assess people's expectations about others' reactions to a behavior and how individuals would hypothetically apply punishments to norm violators—for example, would they withhold housing from a pregnant teen (Mollborn 2009)? Qualitative research documents how norm communication, interpretation, negotiation, and sanctioning work in specific contexts (e.g., Fine 2001, Pascoe 2011, Plemons 2017, Schilt 2010).

Researchers also use other indicators that may approximate norms. For example, some infer norms from textual evidence, such as etiquette manuals, medical textbooks, and news articles (e.g., Abrutyn & Carter 2015, Martin 1991, Saguy & Gruys 2010). Others measure individual attitudes (e.g., Jasso & Opp 1997) and may aggregate responses to collectively assess norms. Still others use typical behavior as an indicator (Settersten 2004).

WHAT EXPLAINS THE CONTENT OF NORMS?

We have defined norms as group-level evaluations and have suggested that, as a practical matter, researchers focus on three principal issues: content, enforcement, and application in context. Below, we discuss work explaining norm content.

The Consequentialist Argument

The most widely accepted, well-tested theory of norms takes a consequentialist approach (Coleman 1990; Heckathorn 1988, 1989; Ullmann-Margalit 1977). In this perspective, when an individual's (the target actor's) behavior creates consequences for other group members (potential beneficiaries), those others have an interest in the behavior. They positively evaluate beneficial behaviors, negatively evaluate harmful ones, and expect other group members to do the same. When everyone in the group experiences similar consequences, norms are conjoint. When some members are affected differently than others, norms may be disjoint such that some group members enforce norms against others. In the consequentialist approach, norms discourage smoking because secondhand smoke harms others' health (Ellickson 2001), and norms discourage drunk driving because it creates hazards for others on the road.

More recently, norms scholars have built on this early research to look at a wider range of interests, actors, and behaviors (e.g., Jasso 2001). They are expanding the typical attention to behavior consequences to analyze the distribution of costs and benefits of focal and nonfocal actions across norm targets, beneficiaries, and enforcers (Horne et al. 2018a). For example, in Ghana, as the costs to a wife for complying with her husband's sexual demands increase or as the husband's maltreatment of the wife increases, norms mandating her compliance become weaker (Horne et al. 2018a). Such work expands the standard focus on the consequences of the target behavior to a broader range of factors, and it highlights variation in the extent to which different categories of people in a group adhere to the group's norms (Dodoo et al. 2020).

When behavior consequences are consistent not just within but also across subgroups, norms are widely held. For example, reciprocity probably has universal implications for the strength of social relationships. Not surprisingly, the norm of reciprocity (which mandates that someone who receives something from another is obligated in return) is widespread across cultures (Gouldner

1960). But when the consequences of behavior differ across groups, groups may have distinct norms. For example, interpersonal violence has different implications for order when law enforcement is effective than when it is lacking. As a result, norms about acceptable use of violence vary across communities (see Anderson 2000 for an analysis of violence norms).

The consequentialist argument has received substantial support in the lab. But researchers have also criticized it, noting instances in the field where it appears not to be predictive (Elster 1989). Sometimes norms encourage behaviors that harm the group (hazing in fraternities) or discourage behaviors that benefit the group (academic norms that disincentivize teaching and service). And the same (harmful) behaviors meet with different levels of disapproval in different contexts. For example, despite widespread knowledge about the dangers of secondhand smoke, antismoking norms appear to vary across countries and subpopulations (Pampel 2006).

Further, the consequentialist approach assumes a shared understanding of harm and benefit. Although harm and benefit may be clear when operationalized as points in a lab-based game, they are not always clear in the field. How harmful is it to water the sidewalk or own a gun? People disagree. Many situations are ambiguous or involve weighing multiple potential harms and benefits (Wildavsky 1993). How are norms created when the benefits and harms of a behavior are not self-evident?

The Relational Argument

Recent research suggests an alternative, potentially complementary approach to explaining norms that can help answer this question. This approach can explain both beneficial and harmful norms and does not require knowledge about behavior consequences. Instead, it emphasizes the importance of social relationships. Because people value their relationships, they want to behave in ways that attract positive social reactions. They are therefore motivated to figure out how others evaluate particular behaviors (Horne 2009, Horne et al. 2018b). A norm emerges when people expect that others approve or disapprove of a behavior and will react accordingly. Thus, in a self-fulfilling prophecy, the inferences people draw from their social environments can produce norms (Frye 2017).

A long-standing stream of research highlights others' actions as important predictors of individual behavior. Recent work builds on this insight to explore the implications of widespread behavior for norms (e.g., Eriksson et al. 2015). If many others engage in a behavior, an individual may reasonably assume that they approve of it (for a related argument, see Opp 2004). If they never engage in it, the individual might expect that they disapprove. Similarly, if people observe others sanctioning, they likely assume that others approve of such sanctions. Thus, although behavioral regularities are not norms, they can produce norms by affecting the expectations people hold about others' evaluations. When people observe widespread patterns of racial segregation, they may infer that others (despite inclusive rhetoric) do not actually support racial integration (Horne et al. 2018b). The more people who engage in a behavior, the more an individual will infer that others approve. And the less variation there is in a behavior, the stronger the descriptive norm (Irwin & Simpson 2013) and the clearer the signal about what is socially acceptable.

Recent research suggests that people pay particular attention to high-status others. The popularity of smokers in high school social networks increases the probability that individual students smoke (Robalino & Macy 2018). Similarly, when central students object to bullying, others bully less (Paluck et al. 2016). Statements and behaviors by institutional actors may also affect people's expectations about the norms to which others adhere. For example, the US Supreme Court's decision in the *Obergefell* case affected people's perceptions of US norms regarding same-sex marriage (Tankard & Paluck 2017).

Finally, physical evidence may be a source of information. People may perceive residents of a neighborhood that is physically kept up as more committed to social order (Keuschnigg & Wolbring 2015) and assume that they will not tolerate violations of norms and laws. Similarly, individuals use group members' physical appearance (e.g., clothing style) to infer that group's norms about sexuality (Bettie 2014).

Although research shows that behaviors most and/or high-status actors engage in may become normative, norms scholars recognize that this does not always happen. Just because many people eat chocolate ice cream does not mean that a norm prescribes its consumption and that those who choose other flavors are sanctioned. Other conditions must affect the likelihood that prevalent behaviors will become normative. Research shows that in situations that create uncertainty about how to behave, people are more likely to rely on others' behavior as a clue (e.g., Álvarez-Benjumea & Winter 2018). But uncertainty alone also is not sufficient to explain why some typical behaviors become normative and others do not. Another possibility is that people must believe a behavior is socially relevant—one that others care about. If people expect that a category of action is socially relevant but they are not sure whether a particular behavior in that category is acceptable, then they will look to others. The question then is, What makes a behavior socially relevant? How do people know that race is socially meaningful and there are accepted and disapproved of ways of talking about race, whereas preferred ice cream flavor may not be something to worry about? The consequentialist approach suggests that if a behavior clearly creates harm for group members, it will likely be socially relevant. Absent clear harm, associations of a behavior with group boundaries or social class distinctions are two likely prospects (Bourdieu 2013). Rationales may also emphasize a behavior's value.

Research finds evidence that norms emerge in response to inferences people draw from their environment. But it also shows that those inferences may be wrong. In part, this is because information flows through networks in socially patterned ways (Shepherd 2017). People may hide or keep secret behaviors they think others will disapprove of [Cowan 2014, Goffman 1963 (1986), Kitts 2003], or they may avoid behaving in certain ways (e.g., expressing political opinions) with people they expect to disagree (Cowan & Baldassarri 2018). Noncompliant actors may overestimate the number of people who share their attitudes, producing false consensus norms (Prentice & Miller 1996). In addition, behavior is not necessarily a good indicator of an individual's internal state [see Simpson & Willer's (2015) discussion of attributional ambiguity]. People may engage in behaviors for reasons that have nothing to do with their evaluations of the behavior. They may be driven by structural, cultural, or situational factors. That people may hide their behaviors and that behaviors do not necessarily reflect attitudes means that pluralistic ignorance—discrepancies between what people believe others approve and what those others actually approve—may be widespread (e.g., Kuran 1997, Prentice & Miller 1996). The implication is that existing patterns of behavior can lead to norms that few genuinely support but that produce further behaviors maintaining the status quo (Centola et al. 2005, Horne et al. 2018b, Willer et al. 2009). These norms can quickly collapse if people become aware that their beliefs about others' evaluations are wrong. Such processes may have contributed to rapid changes in sexuality norms (Ridgeway 2015).

Implications for Norm Persistence, Change, and Erosion

Relatively little work has examined factors that erode norms or prevent norm destabilization. Interest in this issue has increased as Donald Trump's violations of long-standing political norms (e.g., attacking the press and courts and encouraging imprisonment of political opponents) raise questions about their stability (e.g., Levitsky & Ziblatt 2019). Although little sociological work explicitly examines this issue, theories of norm content and enforcement have implications for

understanding norm change and persistence. The consequentialist argument implies that when the consequences of a behavior or the social understandings of those consequences change, norms shift in response. The relational approach suggests that norms change in response to shifting social cues such as new behavioral regularities, statements or behaviors by high-status individuals, or actions by institutional actors. In addition, it suggests that visible violations of norms, and violations that persist in the face of sanctions, erode norms [e.g., Diekmann & colleagues' (2015) discussion of Popitz's (1968) insight; Keizer et al. 2008].

In sum, if norms result from the distribution of costs and benefits associated with behaviors, then norms will be stable as long as that distribution (and associated sanctions) remains the same and will change when costs and benefits (or perceptions of them) change. If norms are maintained through expectations that others approve of a behavior, they are vulnerable to variation in social cues. Better understanding of how interests in the collective good and in others' approval intersect could improve knowledge about norm change. Under what conditions do people pay attention to one or the other? What mechanisms link the two—when do people see what is typical as good for the group and vice versa?

Implications for Order and Inequality

A straightforward application of the consequentialist approach suggests that norms contribute to the collective good, thus enhancing social order. Individuals approve of and expect others to approve of behaviors that help the group (and themselves) and disapprove of behaviors that are harmful. But full consideration of the costs and benefits for different categories of actors, and focal and nonfocal behaviors, suggests that the picture is more complicated (Horne et al. 2018a). Actors in a group may have different interests. And even if people agree that cooperative behavior should be encouraged, they may disagree on what form such behavior should take. People might accept norms requiring fairness yet disagree about whether that means equity or equality (Winter et al. 2012). And when members of different groups have different interests, norms can also diverge. Thus, norms can generate conflict rather than cooperation. Perhaps for this reason, research suggests that norms in large, complex societies tend to be less specific than those in smaller communities (Abrutyn & Carter 2015).

The relational theory suggests little reason to conclude that norms contribute to the collective good [see, e.g., Hechter's (2018) discussion of conventions]. Indeed, norms may actually discourage prosocial action (Irwin & Horne 2013, Tsvetkova & Macy 2015). This is because social clues do not necessarily reflect the underlying characteristics of a behavior. For example, when driven by social influence, the diffusion of music is unpredictable—different songs emerge as popular in different groups based on their initial social ranking rather than anything about the music itself (Salganik et al. 2006). Similarly, lifestyles associated with political identification may have little to do with underlying individual ideology (DellaPosta et al. 2015; see also Centola & Baronchelli 2015). The relational approach also suggests that individuals pay more attention to their social group than to people generally, leading to different norms across groups. Such differences may exacerbate intergroup conflict, particularly when groups sanction out-group members who fail to comply with in-group norms. For example, liberals seek to spread proenvironment norms, and antiabortion activists want everyone (not just the in-group) to follow antiabortion norms.

Beyond affecting social order, the consequentialist and relational approaches have implications for inequality. The consequentialist argument suggests that when people have different interests, norms may benefit some group members more than others. And when people with more power or status are better able to enforce the norms they prefer, norms favor them at others' expense (Ullmann-Margalit 1977). In addition, intergroup competition has implications for inequality.

Research shows that competition between collective action groups (e.g., Benard 2012) can lead to increased inequality across groups in terms of both group size and success (Simpson & Aksoy 2017).

The relational approach suggests that norms are often arbitrary (unrelated to the value of the target behavior). But arbitrary norms can have implications for inequality if particular behaviors are associated with social status. In addition, because people look to high-status or majority actors, norms may reflect the behaviors of those actors rather than lower-status or minority individuals. These dynamics can lead to norms that support inequalities: High levels of racial segregation may produce norms discouraging integration and maintaining the segregated status quo (Horne et al. 2018b). And academic norms rewarding publication over teaching and service may reinforce gender inequalities (Eddy & Ward 2015).

Together, the consequentialist and relational approaches raise questions about the extent to which the content of a norm reflects the value of a behavior for the group or is arbitrary, resulting from history, interaction dynamics, and network structures. Researchers know very little about how the consequences of a behavior and social clues about norms intersect, or how people weigh various sources of evidence in determining norms. To the extent that people assess behavior consequences based on their social environment, relational dynamics will dominate. The less that behavior consequences are reflected in cues in the social environment, the lower the potential for norms to contribute to order.

WHY DO PEOPLE ENFORCE NORMS?

Next, we focus on norm enforcement, including factors and mechanisms that lead people to sanction.

Explaining Sanctioning

Norm enforcement is potentially costly to individuals, requiring time and effort and creating the risk of retaliation. Given such costs, why would anyone enforce a norm? The consequentialist approach suggests that sanctioners are motivated by benefits they will receive if harmful behavior is discouraged. The greater the harm caused by a behavior and the greater the corresponding benefit of discouraging noncompliance, the more reason group members have to sanction (Coleman 1990, Yamagishi 1988; for a related argument about scandal see Adut 2005). And the lower the costs (as when network structures are closed so that individuals can share costs), the more likely people are to sanction (Coleman 1990). But this approach does not explain why individuals are willing to bear the costs of sanctioning rather than simply hope that someone else in the group sanctions. Why do people not just free ride on others' sanctioning efforts?

One possibility is individual variation. People differ in their connection to noncompliant behaviors. Some may experience greater harm from a behavior than others. And some may be in a better position to sanction or experience lower costs if they do so (Diekmann & Przepiorka 2015, Przepiorka & Diekmann 2013). In a designated quiet train car, an individual who is physically closer to someone playing loud music is more likely to sanction than someone who is far away (Przepiorka & Berger 2016).

The relational approach suggests another possibility: Some social structures may facilitate sanctioning more than others (Cook & Hardin 2001). Lab studies show that cohesive social relations encourage metanorms—social reactions to sanctioning efforts (Horne 2009). Metanorms dictate the severity of sanctions, who can sanction, what sanctions are appropriate, etc. (e.g., Strimling & Eriksson 2014). When a metanorm is in place, people reward those who punish norm violations or punish those who do not. For example, when norms limit a wife's reproductive

autonomy, Ghanaian experiment participants expect more positive reactions to a husband who punishes his noncompliant wife by beating her or leaving her for another woman (Horne et al. 2013). And when individuals benefit at the group's expense, people reward those who punish the self-interested individual (Horne 2009). Anticipating such positive reactions, people may impose sanctions even when they disagree with a norm (Willer et al. 2009).

Early metanorms research found that people react more positively to those who punish non-compliance than those who do not and that anticipation of reactions affects sanctioning decisions (Horne 2009). But recent work shows that punishing noncompliance does not always attract approval. For example, people trust those who are generous but do not necessarily trust those who punish selfishness (Przepiorka & Liebe 2016). Furthermore, reactions to others' sanctioning are more negative when the sanctioner is a stranger rather than a friend, the norm violation is minor, and the sanctioner is angry (Eriksson et al. 2017). And research finds that people reward those who reward others but may not reward those who punish others (Kiyonari & Barclay 2008). Reactions also vary depending on assessments of sanctioners' motives—if people believe that someone is enforcing a norm just to look good to others, they may give them little credit for ostensibly prosocial behavior (Kim & Zuckerman Sivan 2017).

Just as the consequences of a behavior may be unclear, what constitutes a social sanction may be ambiguous in the field. Some sanctions are reasonably obvious—people may avoid, criticize, ostracize, gossip, hit, and withhold help. Others are more ambiguous. And some negative social consequences may occur and affect behavior, even though they do not stem from people intentionally imposing sanctions (see Marini 1984 for a related argument). Qualitative research—for example, on sexuality and gender—explores sanctions and their repercussions in the field (e.g., García 2009, Spade 2015).

In addition, although the consequentialist approach implies that sanctioning is good because it discourages antisocial behavior, sanctioning can also have negative effects (Foucault 1978, Pascoe 2011). Most obviously, if a norm is harmful for the group, then enforcement of that norm will also be damaging. Very high levels of sanctioning may be particularly problematic. For example, Durkheim (1951) argued that excessive regulation could lead to fatalistic suicide. Recent scholarship similarly highlights potential harms caused by strong norms and sanctions, showing that in tight-knit communities with strong norms, people who do not live up to those norms may be at increased risk for suicide (Mueller & Abrutyn 2016). Sanctioning can also undermine trust (Irwin et al. 2014) and create recurring cycles of retaliatory punishment. And sanctioning may reveal the prevalence of norm violations, knowledge of which may reduce compliance (Popitz 1968).

Sanctioning Costs

Research on sanctioning typically assumes that it is costly in time, resources, or energy and explores factors and mechanisms that address those costs. Much of the research on social order and the problem of cooperation similarly assumes that monitoring and sanctioning are costly (e.g., Hechter 1987). But this is not always the case. Some sanctions—silence and avoiding eye contact—are easy. Others may actually benefit (rather than impose costs on) the sanctioner. For example, when a Chinese man refused to marry a nonfootbound woman because he believed that footbinding was evidence of the woman's fidelity, the woman was sanctioned and the man believed he benefitted by avoiding marriage to a woman whom he thought might be unfaithful (Mackie 1996). Sometimes sanctioning is enjoyable—gossip, for example, propagates reputational information, thereby producing social rewards and punishments (Shank et al. 2018; see also Feinberg et al. 2012, 2014; Giardini & Wittek 2019). And ostracizing someone who is unpleasant may feel like a relief rather than a burden.

Furthermore, in today's society, ubiquitous sensing and record keeping can make it higher cost to make information about actions private than to keep it publicly available. And it is easy to monitor online behavior. The online environment also creates opportunities for low cost sanctioning—simply click a button or post an anonymous comment. Not surprisingly, online sanctioning can be disproportionate to the original violation. People may be fired or compelled to move to a new city because of a foolish comment or joke (Ronson 2015). Researchers and practitioners have little understanding of how to manage sanctioning in a low-cost world. As online interaction grows, the issues of high-visibility and low-cost sanctioning will become increasingly important.

Implications for Order and Inequality

Substantial research across disciplines provides evidence that social sanctions increase the likelihood that an individual will comply with a given norm (e.g., Fehr & Gintis 2007). Norms have a stronger effect on behavior when the group is able to monitor its members and when norm targets are dependent on the group, such that they do not have alternative resources to help them offset the effects of sanctions and cannot easily leave the group in order to avoid sanctions (Hechter 1987). Thus, teens comply more with norms regulating sexuality than do young adults (Mollborn 2017, Rosenfeld 2007). And politicians are more likely to toe the party line when the party offers benefits such as improved chances of re-election (Hechter 1987).

A number of factors can augment the effects of norms. Importantly, norms that are internalized to become part of an individual's value system motivate behavior because the individual will typically comply or self-sanction their own norm violations through emotional responses such as guilt and embarrassment. People are more likely to comply with norms they perceive as legitimate (Andrighetto et al. 2015). In addition, communication about norms both increases the salience of a norm and sends the message that violations will be punished (Shank et al. 2018). Existing patterns of behavior that are consistent with a norm increase compliance, and nonconformity decreases it. For example, more cultural heterogeneity predicts a wider range of romantic relationship behaviors among teenagers (Harding 2007). Visible violations decrease commitment to norms (Keizer et al. 2008) and increase violations (Diekmann et al. 2015, Popitz 1968). And compliance by high-status actors can encourage others to comply (Paluck et al. 2016).

Assuming that people comply with a norm, what are the implications for social order and inequalities? The consequentialist approach implies that people punish behavior that causes harm and that the severity of sanctioning is calibrated to the seriousness of the violation. Thus, sanctioning contributes to the collective good. The relational approach suggests that people sanction because they anticipate positive social reactions. The strength of social relationships increases the social rewards that sanctioners receive (Horne 2009). This approach implies that norm enforcement reflects not simply a violation's seriousness but also the structure of social relationships. This dynamic can lead to oversanctioning of relatively minor behaviors or undersanctioning of very harmful behaviors and may not contribute to collective well-being.

Both approaches have implications for inequality. If sanctioning simply reflects the consequences of a behavior and those consequences are the same for everyone, then sanctioning contributes to the collective good. But if interests in the behavior vary, then sanctioning may benefit some more than others (Ullmann-Margalit 1977). And if sanctioning is driven by social relationships, it likely reflects people's expectations about what most or high-status others approve. This means that minority or low-status actors may not fare as well as majority or high-status actors. In Germany, native Germans disproportionately enforce antilittering norms, and ethnic minorities are more likely to be targets of sanctions (Winter & Zhang 2018). Thus, sanctioning may reflect and reinforce existing status hierarchies, shoring up or exacerbating inequalities at the expense of lower-status actors.

HOW DO PEOPLE APPLY NORMS IN CONTEXT?

The discussion above relies on the consequentialist and relational approaches to explain norm content and norm enforcement in general. These approaches emphasize social structural factors and tend to have somewhat thin conceptualizations of actors. They find evidence for factors and mechanisms that affect norms in the abstract. But arguably, explanations of norms are limited if they do not address how people apply norms in particular situations. Norms vary across contexts; they are conditional. And norms in and of themselves do not determine how people respond. Although early norms research has been criticized for failing to incorporate human agency and treating norms as overly deterministic (e.g., Marini 1984), recent work examines how people agentially interpret, negotiate, and manage norms in complex situations. This agentic approach investigates how people apply norms to others and what they do when they are the target of a norm. Whereas in lab studies, much of the possible variation in individual decisions is excluded or constrained by design, in the field, researchers explore agentic responses to complex situations.

Recent work advances understanding of how people manage norms by highlighting that norms do not exist in isolation, but in sets and systems (Hechter & Opp 2001), and that different groups can have conflicting or complementary norm systems. Norm sets are rules that regulate the same or closely related behaviors, often undergirded by the same rationale. For example, norms regulate sex, use of contraceptives, pregnancy, and abortion (Mollborn 2017). Norms in a set may be complementary or contradictory. A norm that says one should tell the truth may conflict with a norm that says one should not hurt another person's feelings. We define norm systems as norms that regulate a particular category of actors. Actors in similar structural positions or roles will be subject to multiple norms in a system. Working mothers are constrained by norms that regulate both how to be a good mother and how to be a good worker (Blair-Loy 2003). Norms within the system may be consistent—both mothers and workers are expected to be responsible. But they may also conflict—norms that require complete devotion to a child and to the workplace create competing pressures on working women. An individual may be regulated by multiple reference groups that adhere to different norm sets and systems. A young adult may belong to a religious group that holds strong antiabortion norms while attending a college where peers hold strong prochoice norms. If she experiences an unplanned pregnancy and gets an abortion, her behavior will adhere to one group's norm while violating the other's. When confronted with such contexts, individuals cannot simply blindly comply but must choose which of multiple norms to support and how to apply them.

Research suggests that people use rationales in these decisions (Mollborn 2017). Rationales provide reasons for a norm, explaining why adhering to a norm is a good thing (or not). These reasons may resonate differently for different groups. Rationales underlying norms against teen sex include moral arguments that extramarital sex is immoral and prudential arguments that teens who become pregnant will be limited in their educational and career achievements. Conservative Christians may rely on moral more than prudential rationales in their evaluations of teen sex, and liberals may do the reverse (Luker 2007). People may use rationales in developing expectations for how people will respond to others' behavior and in accounting for their own behavior.

Applying Norms to Others

When applying norms to others, people may use different rationales depending on the characteristics of the norm target and goals for the interaction in question. Individual characteristics can affect the appropriateness of behaviors (e.g., Reilly 2018) because people interpret the meaning of violations based on what they know or assume about those characteristics. For example, age norms dictate appropriate behaviors across the life course: norms against premarital sex, alcohol consumption, or staying out late vary depending on the age of the actor (Settersten 2004).

And norms about parenting vary depending on the parent's gender and sexuality (Mamo 2007, Villalobos 2014). Similarly, people may react differently to a pregnant teen if she is a high-achieving student than if she has a history of shoplifting and substance abuse. More generally, people apply norms differently depending on the status of the norm target (Ridgeway 2014). Thus, people may apply different norms to different categories of actors or apply the same norms differently depending on the actor's characteristics, at least in part because of the rationales undergirding those norms.

Characteristics of a situation may also affect the rationales that help to identify which norm sets and systems apply. One relevant feature of the social context is the goals of the parties involved. For example, killing another person is generally prohibited in civilian life, but in military combat, refusal to kill may be sanctioned. People may excuse what they might otherwise view as inappropriate privacy invasions if the potentially privacy-violating behavior advances collective ends (Nissenbaum 2010, Horne et al. 2015). And gender norms are stronger in sexualized than nonsexual relationships (Schilt & Westbrook 2009).

Managing Norms

In turn, individuals who are targets of norms have to manage their responses. When faced with multiple norm sets, systems, and reference groups, in conjunction with other constraints and opportunities, individuals with a range of internal states (which may or may not be consistent with the norm) agentially decide whether to comply with a norm or violate it.

To avoid receiving sanctions, potential norm targets may seek to enhance their reputation in a group. One way to do this is to punish others' violations. People may enforce a norm they do not accept to prove their commitment (Willer et al. 2009). For example, young people sanction others using "slut" and "fag" labels to avoid those labels being directed at them (Armstrong et al. 2014, Pascoe 2011). Private behaviors that cannot easily be observed, such as many sexual behaviors, make everyone (but especially lower-status actors, about whom others may hold negative stereotypes) potentially vulnerable to sanctions.

People may also try to hide their behavior or portray it as something other than it actually is, recruiting close others to participate in covering up their noncompliant behavior. For example, many teens seek to hide their sexual activity and publicly portray themselves as abstinent, collaborating with friends to say one thing and do another (Mollborn 2017).

Norm violators may also attempt to provide acceptable justifications. People may frame their behavior as a mistake that will not be repeated and pair their accounts with normatively appropriate emotional displays (Sykes & Matza 1957). They may also reframe their nonnormative behavior to justify its appropriateness. Some adults justify their marijuana use as medically necessary, healthy, and natural (Newhart & Dolphin 2018). Similarly, mushroom gatherers describe their activities in ways that minimize the potential damage those activities might cause and differentiate them from greedy others (Fine 2001).

When people are subject to multiple norms, they can selectively claim adherence and draw on rationales to justify complying with one norm rather than another. Culture researchers view norms as part of a cultural tool kit, treating norms as a tool people use in justifying their behavior (Swidler 1986; for a discussion of modes of justification, see Boltanski & Thévenot 1999). Consistent with the cultural tool kit argument, norms research shows that when faced with multiple norms sets, systems, and reference groups, people use norms to articulate justifications for their actions. But norms researchers also view norms as motivating behavior. People adjust both their behavior and their accounts of their behavior in ways they expect others to approve (for related discussion, see Vaisey 2009).

Implications for Order and Inequality

Agentic approaches highlight variability in how norms are applied and describe ways in which individuals might challenge existing norms or justify violations. Such responses may strengthen or weaken the effects of norms in ways that have implications for order and inequalities. Indeed, inequalities are central to much of the research taking an agentic approach. This work shows that people's application and management of norms often serve to uphold existing power differentials, status hierarchies, and unequal sanctioning processes. Individuals maintain existing norms even when they violate them, for example, by hiding their behavior, by justifying it in terms that are socially accepted and consistent with rationales undergirding the norms, or by sanctioning more marginalized others preemptively in order to avoid being sanctioned themselves. Research also shows how people manage competing norms that have the potential to create intergroup conflict. Sometimes people's management of norms serves to uphold the existing order and avoid conflict, but sometimes it can exacerbate conflict, for example, when someone seeks to avoid sanctions by deflecting criticism toward a lower-status group. Finally, research in this area explores how people (sometimes successfully) can overtly challenge existing norms, such as those undergirding status hierarchies.

AN INTEGRATED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We have discussed research explaining where the content of norms comes from, why people enforce norms, and how people apply norms in context. To do so we have highlighted three theoretical perspectives in the sociological literature—the consequentialist, relational, and agentic approaches. Each of these approaches has substantial empirical support. But fundamental questions about norm emergence, change, and erosion remain, seemingly not answerable by any single approach. And norms in the field are difficult to understand: Why have norms around sex and gender changed so dramatically? How vulnerable are political norms to actions by politicians such as Donald Trump? We propose an integrated theoretical framework that can help answer these questions (see **Figure 1**).

Conceptually, we suggest that the consequentialist approach treats norms as a cooperation problem—how can groups compel individuals to contribute to the collective good? This work often focuses on explaining norms as reactions to the consequences of a behavior for a group. Such norms encourage various kinds of cooperative behaviors (see **Figure 1**, arrow 1). The relational approach instead treats norms as a coordination problem—how do people know what behaviors

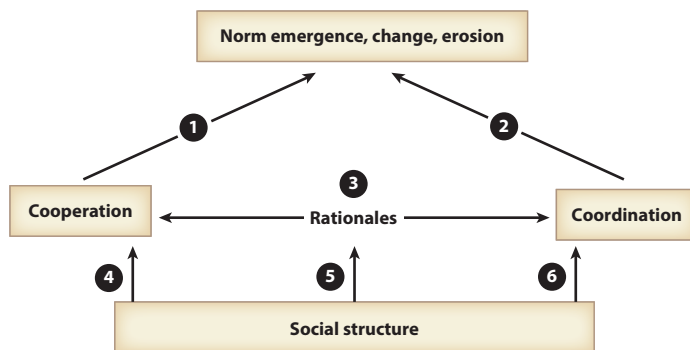


Figure 1

Integrated theoretical framework.

others approve? It explains norms that may have little to do with the common good and more to do with social influence and coordinating behavior—taste in music, fashion, and so forth. In this view, people look to their social environment for clues about what others approve, which in turn produce normative expectations (**Figure 1**, arrow 2).

The relational approach has implications for the behavior consequences people perceive (people assume that social cues capture something about behavior consequences), and behavior consequences have implications for what people assume others prefer (people assume that others prefer behaviors that benefit them) (**Figure 1**, arrow 3). Yet the contours of the interrelationship between cooperation and coordination are not well understood. We suggest that rationales—reasons why a norm is appropriate—provide a cognitive connection between the cooperation and coordination dimensions of norms. They do so by explaining why or how the behaviors made salient by social cues (the coordination problem) are related to the common good (the cooperation problem). The stronger the rationale that links behaviors dictated by social cues to the common good, the stronger the norm and the more emotional and moral resonance it has. Rationales can help people choose between competing norm sets and systems. They can also sometimes produce norm change by undermining existing assumptions about the connection between cooperation and coordination—the extent to which social cues actually support behaviors that contribute to the collective good. For example, the civil rights movement challenged justifications of segregation that associated it with God's desires for a racial hierarchy (making visible the violence associated with such views) and suggested alternative justifications that focused on the American commitment to equality. By changing perceptions of what was good for society, civil rights activists weakened the connection between existing patterns of segregation and the common good and, in turn, norms supporting segregation.

All of these processes are supported by people's social relationships and reference groups, key aspects of social structure: Who do people look to for clues (**Figure 1**, arrow 6)? Who is affected, and how, by an individual's behavior (**Figure 1**, arrow 4)? Whose inputs matter for developing rationales (**Figure 1**, arrow 5)? Thus, social structure underlies the dynamics that lead to social norms.

Can this integrated framework help answer questions about norms? To illustrate its potential, we apply it to explain the dramatic changes in US norms around sexual orientation and gender identity. Consistent with the cooperation component of our framework, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) activists focused on using media to make LGBTQ individuals more visible and to portray them in positive ways, thus undermining widespread perceptions that LGBTQ actors posed a threat to society. In accordance with the coordination component, activists sought to change institutional treatment of LGBTQ issues, removing homosexuality from a list of psychiatric disorders in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, as well as tackling court rulings and legislation to change laws against sodomy, same sex marriage, and so forth. In addition, as LGBTQ individuals became more open about their identities, more people began recognizing LGBTQ individuals in their social networks and among public figures. These social cues provided people with evidence of changing attitudes about LGBTQ issues. Finally, consistent with the rationales component, activists provided rationales for changing treatment of LGBTQ actors, including linking LGBTQ issues to love and individual rights—key concepts in the American psyche. Establishment of these links both strengthened individual emotional commitment to new norms and made it difficult for people to publicly promote an alternative point of view. Together, these three strategies arguably produced a significant change in norms around sexuality and gender.

This integrated approach may help to explain a range of norms-related issues such as challenges to democracy and conflicts over climate change. We expect that explaining norms in the field will

require scholars to be attuned to all three dimensions of norms—cooperation, coordination, and rationales. Each of the three theoretical approaches we describe has spawned research that contributes to understanding norms and the broader theoretical paradigms in which they are embedded. But each approach alone may not be sufficient to answer difficult questions about norms. We suggest that an integrated approach can improve explanations, particularly of substantive norms in the field. It can also help researchers better address connections between norms, social order (including conflict and change), and inequality (including challenges to existing status hierarchies).

Reformers and policy makers are increasingly seeking to harness the power of social norms both to change individual behaviors (such as health habits including excessive alcohol consumption, smoking, recreational drug use, and physical inactivity; e.g., Cislighi & Heise 2018) and to address collective problems (like climate change; e.g., Alcott 2011). Similarly, researchers are examining ways in which norms can produce behavior change. Some of this work focuses on changing social cues, for example, by trying to influence individuals' perceptions of the prevalence of particular behaviors. Changing the frequency of hate speech in an online forum reduces the likelihood that an individual will engage in hate speech (Alvarez-Benjumea & Winter 2018). Other work focuses on social relationships to encourage or discourage behavior. For example, researchers have created online peer groups to provide social support for individual physical activity, finding that such groups are more effective than media messages at producing behavior change (Zhang et al. 2015). And some efforts take a multipronged approach: Scholars describe the use of social pressure to affect footbinding in China (Mackie 1996). Antifootbinding reformers not only explained that the practice of footbinding was leading other countries to view China negatively and described the negative consequences of bound feet, but also created antifootbinding societies in which members pledged not to bind their daughters' feet or to let their sons marry footbound women. These efforts created social pressure against footbinding, leading to a rapid decline in the practice. Thus, some interventions in the field target multiple factors—behavior consequences, social cues, and/or social relationships—to affect behavior. We expect that efforts focusing on social cues (such as providing information about the prevalence of behavior) will be less effective than broader approaches that also link social cues to the collective good and provide strong rationales in support of desired behavior. Our integrated theoretical model may be useful for thinking about multipronged approaches to effecting norm change in order to alter behaviors.

CONCLUSION

We have examined sociological research on the content, enforcement, and application of norms and the implications of norms for social order and inequality. To do so, we have described three approaches to explaining norms—consequentialist, relational, and agentic. These approaches avoid some of the problems of early norms research, which neglected change, conflict, and inequality (Dahrendorf 1959) and treated norms as overly deterministic and individuals as overly socialized (Wrong 1961). We have built on these approaches to propose an integrated theoretical framework for explaining norms. This framework has the potential to help answer difficult questions about norm emergence, change, and erosion. Attending to these issues will be fundamental for sociologists studying norms moving forward.

We have outlined our theoretical framework in general terms. We have not developed a unified theory or articulated how all of the pieces of the three approaches intersect. Developing such a theory will require being explicit about the assumptions and mechanisms in different bodies of work. It is not obvious how to integrate these different assumptions and mechanisms. For example, theories suggesting that individuals look to their social environment for clues raise the possibility that norms are arbitrary and that evaluations hinge completely on social relationships rather than

the behavior itself. But the consequentialist argument suggests that people pay attention to the consequences of behavior. Questions remain about how individuals consider their interests in the collective good and in their social relationships, and how people develop and choose between the rationales that connect them.

Norms research in sociology has traditionally had clear connections to social order but has focused less on the converse—conflict and change. Recent research has begun to examine these issues. Still, little work explores norm conflict within and across groups or systematically investigates norm change, persistence, and erosion. Sociologists still know relatively little about how groups might hasten the demise of unconstructive norms or how erosion of or challenges to existing norms might be countered. New research is tackling these questions. For example, work on heteronormativity examines how LGBTQ-identified people negotiate romantic relationships by rejecting traditional gender norms and replacing them with emergent, more egalitarian group norms (Lamont 2017). Developing systematic theoretical explanations of these issues will increase understanding of the relationship between norms and social order.

Despite the implications of norms research for inequalities and the theoretical compatibility of norms and status theories, little work has integrated these literatures. Integration of theory on sanctions and metanorms with explanations of inequality, such as status characteristics theory, may help explain how status hierarchies affect norms as well as how norms might maintain or challenge existing status hierarchies—for example, informing work on effective bystander responses to microaggressions. Such integration has the potential to increase knowledge about the role of norms in inequalities and the role of hierarchies in the emergence, maintenance, enforcement, and application of norms.

Norms scholars in sociology have traditionally paid little attention to agency. Research is beginning to examine the interplay of agency and norms, but more is needed. How do people develop understandings of the collective good? How does context affect how people interpret and apply norms? Under what conditions do individuals comply with, disobey, or challenge norms? Although existing theory has implications for explaining how individuals manage norms and how norms apply in context, there is still relatively little research focusing on these issues, and general theoretical understanding is thin. Integrating agentic approaches with the consequentialist and relational emphases on social structure has the potential to improve answers to questions such as how groups come to shared (or conflicting) understandings of the common good and when norms are vulnerable to change.

New norms research is furthering explanations of norm content, enforcement, and application; the role of norms in maintaining or undermining social order; and the relationship between norms and inequalities. Norms theory holds the promise of contributing to research on substantively important issues such as threats to democracy; climate change; race relations; and sex, gender, and families. Although explanations of norms have advanced since the early days of sociology, significant questions remain. Answering these questions will improve knowledge about norms and contribute to understanding of two fundamental issues in sociology—social order and inequalities.

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