

SOCIAL NORMS:

DO WE LOVE NORMS TOO MUCH?

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Abstract

Social norms are often cited as the cause of many social phenomena, especially as an explanation for prosocial family and relationship behaviors. And yet, maybe we love the idea of social norms too much to subject them to rigorous test. Compared to the detail in social norms theoretical orientations, there is very little detail in tests of normative theories. In order to provide guidance to researchers who invoke social norms as explanations, we catalog normative orientations that have been proposed to account for consistent patterns of action. We call on researchers to conduct tests of normative theories that test the processes these theories assert.

The importance of social norms is one of the strongest themes in social science, especially sociology (Gibbs, 1965; Horne, 2001b) and are particularly prevalent in family and relationship theory. Social norms are most often seen as a mechanism for social control. Some norms are seen as prosocial standards that promote action beneficial to society (Hechter, 1987; Hechter & Opp, 2001a; Homans, 1974; Horne, 2001b). Other norms are seen to promote action preferred within smaller groups, such as drinking norms among college students (Cho, 2006; Rimal & Real, 2003), drug use among the socially disadvantaged (Friedman, Curtis, Neaigus, Jose, & Des Jarlais, 1999; Latkin & Knowlton, 2005; Musick, Seltzer, & Schwartz, 2008), or some forms of suicide (Durkheim, 1951). Given the pervasiveness of social norms explanations, it is surprising that social researchers so seldom test the processes described by normative theories.

Researchers often show that their results are *consistent* with hypothesized social norms, but few attempts have been made to verify the hypothesized processes by which norms are asserted to cause the studied actions (Cialdini, 2007; Hechter & Opp, 2001a; Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini,

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Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2008).

The purpose of this paper is to clarify the often confusing conceptualizations of norms (Hechter & Opp, 2001a; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005) and thus to facilitate the goal of testing normative processes. To do this, we propose a coherent set of normative terms and use them to catalog many of the theoretical processes by which norms have been said to have a causal impact on action.

In the usage that we follow in this paper, customs, approval norms, and enforcement norms are group-level phenomenon, so when we use the noun “norm,” we are referring to such group-level phenomena. We will use the adjective “normative” for processes that relate to the association between action and customs, approval norms, or enforcement norms. Thus, individual-level phenomena such as the perception of a custom and a perception of an approval norm are normative phenomena, but are not conceptualized here as “norms” themselves.

Norms researchers have proposed many different explanations for the mechanisms by which norms are said to affect action.^[1] Unfortunately, in spite of the large number of proposed explanations and the large number of studies collecting data about norms and action, very few of these explanations have been actually tested. Instead there have been many studies that have found a statistical association between customary action and an action under study (e.g., DiClemente, 1991; Maticka-Tyndale, 1991; White, Terry, & Hogg, 1994). Unfortunately, such an association does not distinguish between the case where the study participant’s action is caused by the customary action of others and the case where both the study participant and those exhibiting the action are motivated by a common factor. Similarly, many studies have found a statistical association between a common approval of an action and a study participant’s performance of the action (Cialdini, 2007; Fishbein et al., 1995; Maticka-Tyndale, 1991). Again, however, this association does not distinguish between the case where the study participant’s action is caused by the customary approval of others and the case where both the study participant’s own approval and action and the approval of others are motivated by a common

factor.

The importance of specifying and testing process

The inadequacy of these correlational and even experimental studies is that they assume what they claim to test. The correlation between my action and another's action might be caused by others' influence over me (a normative explanation); or the correlation might exist because the others and I have the same motivation for performing the action (a non-normative explanation). The use of a correlation between common action and an actor's action seems to represent a curious preference for a perpetual motion conception of norms. In this view an actor's action may be seen as caused by the common customs observed by the actor. But if the actor is representative of those who perform the common action, then the very action that creates and constitutes the common custom is being seen as caused by itself. A perpetual motion mechanism indeed. Most of us may have eaten breakfast this morning, but this common action may have been caused by our individual hunger and not been imposed on us by a societal norm. Furthermore, to the extent that relationship duration depends on similar values and behaviors (e.g., if I am more likely to continue relations with others who are available to eat breakfast with me), then the customs that I observe within my social environment will be biased by my own personal values (Noel & Nyhan, 2011).

Any attempt to argue that a custom explains some common action such as condom use, student drinking, energy usage, or parenting, is unpersuasive unless the process of causal effect is demonstrated. If, as Sumner (1906) suggests, each actor performs the action because it meets the actor's personal needs or helps to reach the actor's goals, then it is the independent action of multiple actors that causes the custom, not the custom that causes each actor's action. Thus any correlation between perception of a custom and an actor's action is singularly uninformative. The covariation of the custom and the actor's action cannot be attributed to causation by the custom or by the actor's personal motivation without an establishment of the process by which cause is asserted to operate.

In this paper, we undertake to review the literature on social norms to identify a large number of proposed explanations for the mechanisms by which social norms fulfill the function of social control. We will undertake this task first by being precise in our use of normative terminology. Second, we will attempt to be explicit about the logic of normative explanations; we will do this by formulating theoretical orientations that correspond to the major proposed explanations of normative effects.

Normative terminology

For many authors a norm is an explicit statement or an implicit attitude about some social action: for example, a norm may be “Most people eat breakfast every day” or “It is good for people to eat breakfast every day.” Of course, a statement or attitude of this type is a constant, and in introductory statistics we learned that a constant cannot predict a variable and thus a constant cannot explain variation in a phenomenon. However, if we compare one group or culture in which very many people eat breakfast every day with another group or culture in which fewer people eat breakfast every day, then the *prevalence* of eating breakfast every day can be asserted to explain some variable phenomenon, such as school performance. A norm such as “People should brush their teeth” is the same for everyone. People who brush and people who don’t are confronted by the same norm, so it is not the norm that can explain the difference. It is the variation in the meaning the norm has for a group, the strength with which a norm is advocated, or the forcefulness of a threat of punishment that explains the effect of a norm on an action.

Some authors have described normative terminology as confusing, overlapping, and vague (e.g., Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). Accordingly, we propose the following concepts that will appear in the normative theoretical orientations we will describe:

- The prevalence of an action in a group. An action that is confirmed to have high prevalence is a “custom.”
- The perception of the prevalence of an action in a group. These perceptions are sometimes called “descriptive norms” (e.g., Cialdini, Kallgren, & Reno, 1991; Cialdini,

Reno, & Kallgren, 1990; Fishbein et al., 1995; Maticka-Tyndale, 1991). Presumably this perception generally reflects the actual prevalence in the group, although perceptions of prevalence may be inaccurate, sometimes referred to as “pluralistic ignorance” (Miller & McFarland, 1991; H. O’Gorman, 1986).

- The level of approval of an action in a group (generally both the frequency and strength of approval). Lapinski and Rimal (2005) refer to this as a “collective norm” (see also Thoits, 1989). We will refer to an action that is confirmed to have a high level of approval as an “approved action.” The consistent explicit or implicit statement of the approval is an “approval norm.”
- The perception of the level of approval of an action in a group. These perceptions are often called “injunctive norms” (Cho, 2006; Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005; Miller & McFarland, 1991) or “subjective norms,” when the approval of only the most important others is important (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975).
- The level of enforcement of an action in a group (Horne, 2004). An action that is confirmed to have a high level of enforcement is an “enforced action.” The explicit or implicit statement of the intention to enforce is an “enforcement norm.”
- The perception of the level of enforcement of an action in a group.
- Still other terms are sometimes used, such as “personal norms,” self-based expectations for action that come from internalized values, have been proposed (Cialdini & Trost, 1998).

Theoretical orientations

In this paper, we focus our attention at the level of the theoretical orientation (Bell, 2009; Hage, 1972). We make a clear distinction between the logic of an explanation and its application to particular social phenomena. Thus, we examine the logic of normative concepts and normative explanations rather than their application in a theory to any specific social phenomenon. In the language of theory construction [citation removed], each theoretical orientation if well formed is

logically true (Carnap, 1956). And since a theoretical orientation is logically true, it has no empirical content and cannot be empirically tested. However, the logic of the theoretical orientation can be applied in principle to any given phenomenon to construct a *theory* of that phenomenon. The factual truth of the theory using the logic (i.e., empirical support for the given application) can and should be tested. Thus, the *logic* of normative influence is described in theoretical orientations, and such orientations can then be used to construct a theory of any particular empirical phenomenon.

Because a theoretical orientation is logically true, we make no claims in this paper for the preference for one orientation over another. The usefulness of an orientation depends on whether its application to a given phenomenon can be verified through rigorous test. A particularly important aspect of a normative theoretical orientation—as any orientation—is that it describes the causal process that is asserted to link the norm concept to action. The failure to test process, as described above, is a major weakness we see in most empirical studies of norms. We expect any investigator who proposes a normative theory to test the logic of that theory (as we discuss further below).

A theoretical orientation is not just about the relation between two concepts. It is more importantly about the process that causally links the concepts (Bell, 2009; Hage, 1972). A theory applies the process of an orientation to an empirical context, so every theory is properly a T theory of Y, where “T” is a theoretical orientation and “Y” is the phenomenon being explained (Merton, 1967). A thorough test of such a theory demands a test of the process as well as a test of the epistemic correlation between the starting concept (such as a custom, approval norm, or enforcement norm) and the ending concept Y. Thus, it is not enough to show that an action covaries with a norm (i.e., with the prevalence of a custom, its approval, or threats of punishment) to confirm a normative theory. The theoretical orientation and the theory derived from it state some process that links the norm to the action, and until this process is verified, the theory is not fully supported. As we catalog below, many different theories, each with a different explanatory

process, can potentially account for the same covariation, so the test of the theory process helps resolve the disjuncture by comparatively testing the theory against theories from other orientations with other explanatory processes (Jones, 2009).

NORMATIVE THEORETICAL ORIENTATIONS

To fulfill our goal of explicating many of the theoretical processes by which norms have been said to cause action, we will organize our discussion according to three of the normative concepts we described above. Figure 1 displays the concepts we describe here and distinguishes types of theoretical orientations we describe below.

Figure 1 about here.

We will describe these orientations in varying detail below (we do not have space to describe all of them in detail). We classify these orientations as (A) origin orientations, that describe the causal processes by which norm concepts arise; and (B) causal orientations that describe the causal effect of a norm concept on action. In Figure 1 and Tables 1-5, we distinguish origin orientations as “ A_n ,” and causal orientations as “ B_n ,” where n is an ordinal integer.

The figure has four sections. The upper right section depicts processes by which actors are motivated to achieve their goals and meet their needs. The left-hand section depicts the origin processes that specify connections between norm concepts, such as how approval norms emerge from customs and how enforcement norms often follow from approval norms. Next to this is a section that depicts processes by which actors come to perceive social norms and customs. To the right is a section to depict orientations that contain processes by which authors have asserted that norms cause action. In general, these processes begin with customs, approval norms, or enforcement norms, and then operate through the perception of the corresponding normative phenomenon and additional causal processes.

Customs

As described above, we use “custom” to refer to a prevalent action within a group of

interacting actors. The (level of) prevalence of the action in the group is the concept that can, in appropriate circumstances, be asserted to cause action. We describe four theoretical orientations, A1 through A4 to account for the origin of customs and social norms, and two theoretical orientations A5 and B1 that explain how customs, once they have emerged, have an effect on action (Table 1).

Table 1 about here.

A1. Specific motivation. Sumner (1906) argues that all norms arise out of habits. That is, actors perform actions that they have found useful to satisfy their various motivations (Theoretical orientation A1 in Table 1 and in Figure 1).^[2] These motivations may be self interest for personal benefit, caregiving for the benefit of special others, fear of general or partner-related threat, anger to reduce threat or restore loss, attachment to receive protection or support from a partner, or other motivation [citations removed]. The first time an actor performs an action, it is done out of an expectation that the action will satisfy a motivation. If the action is successful in satisfying the motivation, it will be repeated when the need recurs, and the repetition creates the actor's habit (Sumner, 1906; Sumner & Keller, 1927; Wrong, 1994). A1 is not actually a single orientation: it can be seen to represent a different orientation for each potential motivation.

A2. Emergent custom. As prevalence increases, what was individual action becomes common *custom*. A2 describes a nonintentional process by which multiple actors, without coordination, come to perform a common action, each for a personal reason. In most cases, these personal reasons are from the same motivation, but they do not need to be the same to produce equivalent action.

In much of the literature on norms, these common actions (and/or their perceptions) are referred to as "descriptive norms." However, as described by Sumner (1906), these actions become common well before they are *recognized* as common. Thus, habits and customs are often and perhaps even largely created and perpetuated by motivations of actors acting individually, and the consistency of the pattern is caused by actors' similar motivations and conditions. The

complex interaction of habit and custom can be seen in Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus. Whether a custom is "normative" in the sense that its commonality *causes* action is an empirical question that can be answered only after the causal process has been verified, and we believe it is inappropriate to call a custom a "norm" until after such causal influence has been verified.

There are two theoretical orientations that describe how a custom can contribute to the performance of an action. The first of these suggests how a custom, without having a direct causal effect on an individual's action, can contribute to the actor's motivation to perform the action. The second suggests a causal impact of a custom on action.

A3. The social learning theoretical orientation. When an actor observes a customary action, the actor tries to make sense of this pattern. One inference that the actor might make is to infer that the action is customary because the action has provided benefits to others. If the actor makes an inference that others are performing the action because they are being rewarded by that action, the actor may then perform the action because the actor infers that the actor will be rewarded the same way (Bandura, 1977; Goldstein, Griskevicius, & Cialdini, 2007; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005; R. O'Gorman, Wilson, & Miller, 2008; Pool & Schwegler, 2007; Simons, Whitbeck, Conger, & Melby, 1990). In a social learning process, it is not rewards from the group after performing the action that motivate the actor, but instead it is the actor's belief that the action will be rewarding in itself because other members of the group have previously been so rewarded. In social psychology, a similar process is referred to as "social comparison" (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000; Festinger, 1954; Merton & Rossi, 1968). In sociology, it is often referred to as "diffusion of innovation" (Rogers, 1995) A related process is referred to as the "theory of normative influence" (Rimal & Real, 2003); instead of inferring the existence of a reward as in social learning, the actor is already aware of the reward, but the perception of the custom serves to augment this awareness.

Figure 2 about here.

Note that if the actor *already* knows that the action will bring the reward, then the actor is not

learning from the observation. Thus, to establish a social learning process, the researcher must establish that the actor did not know about the reward *until* observing the action and inferring the reward of others. In the social learning process, the perception of common action has a causal effect on the actor's awareness of a means to achieve the actor's motivation. Once that connection has been made, continued performance of the action is no longer under the influence of the social learning process.

A4. Group approval theoretical orientation. As members of the group become aware of the common custom and its success in satisfying group members' motivations, they may come to value the custom for its general contribution to the group (Sumner, 1906; Wrong, 1994). At the macrosocial level of the overall group, the custom becomes an approved norm. As group members come to approve of the custom in general, this approval becomes a blanket approval of the action for *all* members of the group. The group thus comes to share a common belief that actors have an obligation to perform the action (Homans, 1950; Opp, 1982). In many forms, the recommendation of the action takes on a moral tone.

A5. Group enforcement theoretical orientation. Approval of an action by members of a group does not require any overt behavior on the part of group members. The approval represents a relatively passive desire that the action be performed. However, if the action is seen as important to the survival or effectiveness of the group, then approval may transform into control—an approval norm is transformed into an enforcement norm to serve a social control function (Coleman, 1990; Parsons, 1951; Umberson, 1987). Actors can be coerced to conform to social norms that express the goals of society as a whole or of a local group. Orientations that describe the coercive power of social norms have been common, and in fact some have used the coercion potential of social norms to characterize all norms (Bendor & Swistak, 2001; Goode, 1960). For example, norms are rules “enforced through social sanctions” (Horne, 2001a) and “regulatory forces” (Kitts, 2006). For other authors, coercion is only one of the pathways by which norms affect action: norms are “rules that...guide or constrain social behavior” (Cialdini & Trost, 1998), where

“constrain” suggests coercion and “guide” indicates simple approval.

CAUSAL PATHWAYS

There appear to be four families of pathways by which a social norm has been asserted to cause action. In Tables 2-5, they are described as the uncertainty pathway, identity pathway, reward pathway, and enforcement pathway.

Uncertainty Pathway

We describe a single theoretical orientation that describes the causal effect of social norms along the uncertainty pathway.

B1. Uncertainty theoretical orientation. While the social learning theoretical orientation describes customs as basically information sources on the basis of which an actor may pursue the actor’s own motivations, the uncertainty theoretical orientation argues that in some cases the custom can be a direct cause of an actor’s action (Table 2). Under conditions of uncertainty, an actor may observe the common actions of others and simply copy those actions (Berger, 1987; Brashers et al., 2000; Sherif, 1964; Smith, Hogg, Martin, & Terry, 2007). By definition, under uncertainty, the actor does not know what motivation to adopt, so not having a personal standard to apply, the actor instead adopts the common action as an appropriate end in itself. Thus, the actor does not have a known personal motivation to perform the action (such as to receive approval from others, as in the social compliance orientation discussed below). This situation is common in cases where normal social structure has been abrogated and the actor adopts an emerging custom (Sherif, 1964).

Table 2 about here.

The difference between the uncertainty orientation and the social compliance orientation (below) is the difference between “informational” influence and “normative” influence (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955). In economics, similar processes of information uncertainty are referred to as “herd behavior” (Banerjee, 1992) and “information cascades” (Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, & Welch,

1992).

Identity Pathway

The identity pathway is one of two primary pathways by which an approval norm has been asserted to produce action. This pathway is characterized by the way that actors come to perceive and interpret the approval of the action in terms of its meaning within a bounded group. Approval norms taken as group identification are not perpetuated for the instrumental value of the action, but for the expressive value of the action as a symbolic element in the collective identity and in the identity of the individuals as members of the group (Burke & Stets, 2009; Thoits & Virshup, 1997). Table 3 describes four theoretical orientations that represent variations of the identity pathway (B2 social identity to B5 group support).

Table 3 about here.

B2. Social identity theoretical orientation. Adhering to traditional action that symbolizes the group can be perceived by the actor as an indicator of membership in the group. This requires seeing the group as an identifiable in-group distinguishable from an out-group. For the symbolic meaning of the action to have an impact on the actor's action, the actor must have a desire to share the group identity. Adopting those actions verifies the actor's identity as a group member (Boer & Westhoff, 2006; Stets & Burke, 2000). In the social identity orientation, the actor chooses to adopt these expectations as a way of adopting the symbolic meaning of the group, a meaning that partially defines who the actor is.

Figure 3 about here.

Other identity pathway orientations are described in Table 1: B3 membership expression theoretical orientation (Burke & Stets, 2009; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005; R. O'Gorman et al., 2008; Pool & Schwegler, 2007; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994), B4 reflected value theoretical orientation (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and B5 group support theoretical orientation (Kitts, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Where the social identity orientation expresses the actor's borrowed sense of "who I am," the membership expression orientation expresses "where I belong," the

reflected value orientation expresses “where my worth comes from,” and the group support orientation expresses “whom I want to support.” The group support effect is increased when the actor feels a common fate with the group (Brewer & Kramer, 1986; De Cremer & Van Vugt, 1999; Tajfel, 1981).

Reward Pathway

Approval norms are not only perceived and interpreted in terms of the symbolic meaning of the action to the bounded group. They are also perceived and interpreted in terms of the group’s willingness to reward the actor for performing the action. Approval norms thus interpreted are statements of “obligatory actions or evaluative rules” (Rossi & Berk, 1985), “what people should and should not do given social surroundings and circumstances” (Hechter & Opp, 2001a), and “standards of behavior based on widely shared beliefs how individual group members ought to behave” (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004). Approval of the actor and other forms of reward follow when the action is performed and are withheld when the actor fails to perform the action. Theoretical orientations that rely on the reward pathway emphasize a form of influence whose force is entirely implicit. There is no overt influence beyond the exhortation itself in these explanations. The influence is persuasive without being coercive. Table 4 identifies four theoretical orientations that represent the reward pathway. All four orientations have the same general logic, as shown in Figure 4. For each it is the actor’s perception that the group approves the action that leads the actor to anticipate a reward for performance of the action. The difference in the orientations is in the directness and types of rewards offered by the group.

Table 4 about here.

Figure 4 about here.

Reward pathway orientations are B6 the direct exchange orientation, B7 the social exchange orientation, B8 the social compliance orientation, and B9 the moral persuasion orientation. For the direct exchange orientation, the actor anticipates a single reward for a single performance of the action (Coleman, 1990). For the social exchange orientation, it is the anticipation of a stream of

rewards that motivates a continuing performance of the action (Blau, 1986; Hechter & Opp, 2001a, 2001b; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005; R. O'Gorman et al., 2008). For the social compliance orientation, the anticipated reward is acceptance by the group (Smith, Terry, & Hogg, 2007). In some occasions, the social compliance orientation is called "herd theory" (see the uncertainty orientation above) and is usually applied to contexts where the actor is uncertain about appropriate actions and chooses to perform common approved actions in order to be accepted (Chao, Zhang, & Chiu, 2009). For the moral persuasion orientation, the anticipated reward is an internal reward from the values absorbed from the group.

Enforcement Pathway

While there is no reliance on coercion in the orientations along the identity and reward pathways, this changes along the enforcement pathway. As members of a group come to believe that actors have an obligation to perform an action, they may go beyond *recommending* the action to *requiring* the action. The group develops punishments by which members threaten to intervene actively to produce the action in order to enforce the requirement.

Theoretical orientations involving the enforcement pathway

The three orientations along the enforcement pathway follow a similar logic (Figure 5). The normative concept that distinguishes groups and norms along this pathway is the level of enforcement of the norm. In this logic, the group's willingness to punish to enforce performance of the action is perceived by the actor. This perception activates the actor's fear of punishment and this fear motivates the actor's performance of the action.

Table 5 about here.

Three theoretical orientations describing the causal impact of enforcement norms are B10 the direct coercion orientation, B11 the social power orientation, and B12 the normative socialization orientation. In the logic of the direct coercion orientation, the threat of punishment is direct, as nonperformance of the action will activate direct punishment of the actor (Chafetz, 1990; Nye,

1980). In this orientation, any current rewards to the actor are irrelevant. In the logic of the social power orientation, the punishment consists of a loss of current rewards, as nonperformance of the action will lead members of the group to withhold current rewards until the action is performed (Blau, 1986; Cho, 2006; Gecas, 1976; Horne, 2004; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). In the logic of the normative socialization orientation, the threat of direct punishment or loss of reward occurred in the past to such an extent that the actor has internalized the threat, and now the actor threatens him/herself for failure to perform the action (Parsons, 1951; Parsons & Bales, 1955). Similar to the social learning and moral persuasion orientations, the normative socialization orientation describes a process that occurred at some time in the past. However, unlike those orientations, current action is not governed by personal motivations but is directly constrained against those personal motivations by the internal threat of self-punishment.

Figure 5 about here.

Additional considerations

Each of the theoretical orientations in this section has involved a causal process from a collective norm concept (custom, approval norm, or enforcement norm) through the perception of that concept (perception of prevalence of custom, perception of symbolic meaning of approved norm to group, perception of group reward for action, perception of group's threat of punishment) through further causal processes to the actor's final action. It is important in tests of normative theories to distinguish between a custom, an action that is prevalent in a group, and a perceived custom, the actor's perception of the prevalence of the action as well as between a group's approval and perception of that approval and between enforcement and perception of enforcement. These need not be the same. Some perceptions of customs, approval norms, and enforcement norms are often inaccurate, as in the case of pluralistic ignorance (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005, p. 147; Miller & McFarland, 1991; H. O'Gorman, 1986). Nevertheless, actors in such a case are likely to act in accordance with their perception of the custom, approval norm, or enforcement norm. For example, college students often overestimate the prevalence of drinking among their

peers (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986; Perkins & Wechsler, 1996). In such a case, of course, the action of drinking is not caused by the (true) social norm (of not drinking). In fact, such a case shows the *failure* of normative social control and should be considered evidence *against* a theory of social norm causation. [3] This case does describe a real and important social process, but it is not a process of social control through norms.

In the theoretical orientations in this paper, we have emphasized the straightforward effect of a collective phenomenon such as a custom, approval norm or enforcement norm on the corresponding perception. However, occasionally actors may make complex inferences. For example, it has been argued that customs, as actors perceive them, can lead to the inference of other normative phenomena. The perception of a custom in a group can lead to the perception of a group's approval of the customary action. An example is Cialdini & Trost's (1998) description of a process by which a custom is perceived ("descriptive norm" for them) and leads the actor to infer a group reward (an "injunctive norm"), which is then converted into a personal motivation (a "personal norm"), which then causes the action. For Rimal & Real (2003), perceived custom is suggested to moderate the effect of an approval norm on the intention to perform the action. That is, the effect of the enforced norm is asserted to be stronger when supported by the perception of a custom.

Note that the reward and enforcement processes apply to constructing theories about persons whose groups know about the person's conforming or deviating action, or whom the person expects to know. Thus, tests of these theories ought to be conducted with group awareness as a moderating variable. Similarly, the social learning process applies when the actor perceives that a customary action is relevant to the actor's own situation, so perceived relevance should be a moderator in tests of the social learning process. Furthermore, the social learning process and moral persuasion process only apply at the initial decision to adopt an observed action, because once the actor has learned that the action satisfies the actor's personal motivation, there would appear to be no more reason for the actor to refer back to the originally observed

custom; thus one would expect a recency modifier to be significant.

Discussion

When one loves a partner, one feels constrained to show loyalty. One does not dwell on weaknesses and vulnerabilities; instead one provides support and encouragement. In our loyalty we believe in our partner implicitly; we would feel unfaithful if we questioned our beloved too closely. Just as we are hesitant to question too closely someone we love, sometimes in our theoretical commitments we seem to be equally constrained. This may be the case in our relationship with the idea of social norms. We seem to love the idea of social norms too much. The plethora of normative theoretical orientations is symptomatic of our love of norms. Love makes us creative in finding ways to talk about norms (“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways...”). Yet we do not seem to be willing to subject these loved ideas to the potential embarrassment of detailed test because it would suggest that for all our love we are not satisfied with our beloved.

When we do test normative theories, we attempt only the safest, weakest tests. It is all too frequent for researchers to describe some normative logic that connects a normative concept to an action, and then for a test of the theory to compute a correlation or multivariate regression coefficient to show an association between a normative variable and an action. The most frequent type of empirical study of social norms relates either perception of frequent action (a “descriptive norm:” study participants are asked, “what do others do?”) or perception of an approval norm (an “injunctive norms:” they are asked, “what do others want you to do?” or “what did they tell you to do?”) or both, to some action. The researcher may explicate a theory involving, perhaps, social learning or uncertainty. Then covariation between the perceived custom (the “descriptive norm”) and the action and/or between the perceived group approval (the “injunctive norm”) and the action is taken as evidence for the theory.

A major weakness of this sort of analysis is that both customs and “injunctive norms” may be

consequences of individual action and belief rather than their cause. For example, it is often claimed that customs (“descriptive norms”) cause action. One proposed explanation is that actors observe others performing an action and being rewarded by it, so the actor performs the action with the idea of receiving the same reward (social learning orientation). Another proposed explanation is that actors, under conditions of uncertainty, observe the common actions of others and copy those actions (uncertainty orientation). Another explanation, almost never tested, is that actors choose an action that will meet their needs and also coincidentally observe that others are commonly performing the same action. Contemporary empirical studies of norms routinely disjunctively combine these different causal processes within a single category of “descriptive norm” and are not designed to distinguish between these explanations (Jones, 2009).

Furthermore, there are dozens of complex indirect chains of logic that might link customs to actions. For example, through a group identity inference, the symbolic meaning of a traditional action may influence the action through one of the four orientations of the identity pathway. Or after inferring a traditional action, the actor may further infer that the action is obligatory, influencing the action by one of the four orientations on the reward pathway. Our goal in this paper has been to urge researchers to begin to specify these direct and indirect normative theories and to test them explicitly. We have elsewhere conducted analyses of this type [citation removed].

It is important, therefore, to test the theoretical *process* linking the norm and action by testing the intervening variables that represent the causal process. There are well known statistical methods for testing mediation (e.g., Baron & Kenny, 1986; MacKinnon, 2008; MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). This is the step that most empirical work on norms has skipped.

Some authors have noted that people often appear to be unaware that their decisions were affected by norms (e.g., Nolan et al., 2008). We have to be careful about claims of cause. We, the authors of this paper, have taken courses and read literature on theory. And yet we are not willing to claim that our work on this paper was *caused* by this training. The training did provide the

backdrop and the opportunity to work on this paper, but we trace the cause of the paper to our interest in its subject. Furthermore, there are professional norms about the quality of theoretical analysis and reporting expected in published research. We agree that these norms exist, but we believe that for us—and for most published authors—the norms exist because others like us are personally committed to high quality research. Reviewers make comments about the quality of our work—and thus threaten our goal of publication. We believe that the comments of reviewers represent a collaborative commitment to quality rather than a sanction to force us, against our selfish will, to produce a quality product.

Each of the theoretical orientations we have described in detail or indicated more briefly may be applied to any empirical context. The term “may” is important. The uncertainty theoretical orientation may be applied to a norm of brushing teeth, a norm of binge drinking, or a norm of heterosexual dating. Thus we can create an uncertainty theory of brushing teeth, an uncertainty theory of binge drinking, or an uncertainty theory of heterosexual dating. Or we can instead create a social exchange theory of heterosexual dating, or we can create a nonnormative attachment and caregiving theory of heterosexual dating. Each of these theories is falsifiable. Thus the importance of the “may.” The appropriateness of applying any theoretical orientation to a given phenomenon is always questionable until the process has been empirically verified. At the same time, no empirical test can falsify a theoretical orientation, because the orientation is a purely abstract statement that describes the logic of a given explanation, not its application [citation removed]. But one can apply a theoretical orientation to construct a theory for a given context, and this theory to which the orientation is applied may be empirically judged to be true or false. It may be that heterosexual dating is never explained by an uncertainty process, but it may be that for some portion of the population but not for others, heterosexual dating is an uncertainty phenomenon. Or it may not be. Without testing of the process, we will not know.

We are particularly concerned that normative theories be given careful and thorough tests because we believe that many phenomena often rather casually linked to norms may not be

explained by norms at all—of if so, only for small portions of the population. There may be, for example, some parents who nurture their children only out of fear of social sanctions, and there may be other parents who nurture only for the reward they receive from neighbors or a spouse. But we are convinced that the social norm of parental nurture exists because it reflects the spontaneous action of most parents who actively love their children and nurture them to express that personal love [citation removed]. The non-normative processes of caregiving and attachment are likely to be more important in many areas of family and relationship research than normative processes.

We have been careful to note that, following Sumner and Wrong, many common customs emerge out of individual motivations and individual problem solving. Some common customs certainly occur because they are wholly caused by social norms through one or more of the processes we have cataloged above. But other common customs, it is clear, are created by non-normative processes. In Figure 1, there are two boxes, “Actor’s repeated action” and “Actor’s normative action,” that can be observationally indistinguishable. How an action should be classified depends on whether a researcher can show one of the normative causes of the action or instead show a non-normative motivational cause.

For these reasons, we recommend more conservative vocabulary in talking about customs. We believe that calling them “customs” instead of “descriptive norms” is to be preferred until *after* a specific normative process has been empirically verified. This is why the origin of norms is so important. If actors find that an action meets their needs in some situation, and if the action becomes approved and perhaps required in this situation, then in subsequent similar situations will the action be produced by the original motivation to meet needs or by the norm operating through identity, reward, or enforcement pathway(s)? If in subsequent similar situations the action is produced by the motivation to meet the actor’s needs, a normative claim is unnecessary, and in fact is misleading, as an explanation of current action.

Social scientists may be, as we have suggested in our subtitle, too enamored with social

norms. One of the reasons we may have fallen in love with social norms is that they promise to tell us why self-interested actors do things that are against their assumed self interest, like raising children, or not eating as much chocolate as we want, or making the effort to recycle. One reason for the proliferation of normative orientations may be the poverty of motivations considered by social scientists. The single concept of self interest has been so dominant within the social sciences (Azar, 2004; Barry, 1970; Kitts, 2006; Mansbridge, 1990) for so long that social scientists have developed elaborate explanatory chains to try to account for action that seems not to be self-interested at all. We think theorists should enlarge their awareness of human motivations. For example,

- Maybe parents nurture children because they love them, not because they are coerced, rewarded, or morally persuaded by norms.
- Maybe college students drink because of fear (of loneliness, of failure), not through normative (“social pressure”) processes.
- Maybe dyadic interaction with a romantic partner causes actors to examine or re-examine their own values, and then actors choose their actions based on their values. Or maybe not.

Each of the above poses the choice between a normative explanation and a non-normative explanation. Empirical research is needed to choose. What we have presented here is a survey of theoretical orientations. For a given empirical action, each orientation can in principle be used to construct a theory and theoretical process that might apply to the target action. Each of these constructed theories can be tested.

What has been missing from much of the research on social norms has been an organized effort to construct and test normative theories and the specific causal pathways they assert. The general failure to test the processes of normative theories, along with the failure to make a clear distinction between non-causative emergent action and causative social norms has, we believe, limited the contributions that the social norms literature has made to sociology in particular and

social science in general. Our goal in this paper has been to urge researchers to begin to conduct such tests of normative theories. Our clarification and specification of multiple pathways by which norms have been said to influence action should provide future authors interested in this topic some assistance in testing these theories and the processes behind them.

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Figure 1. Normative Concepts and Theoretical Orientations

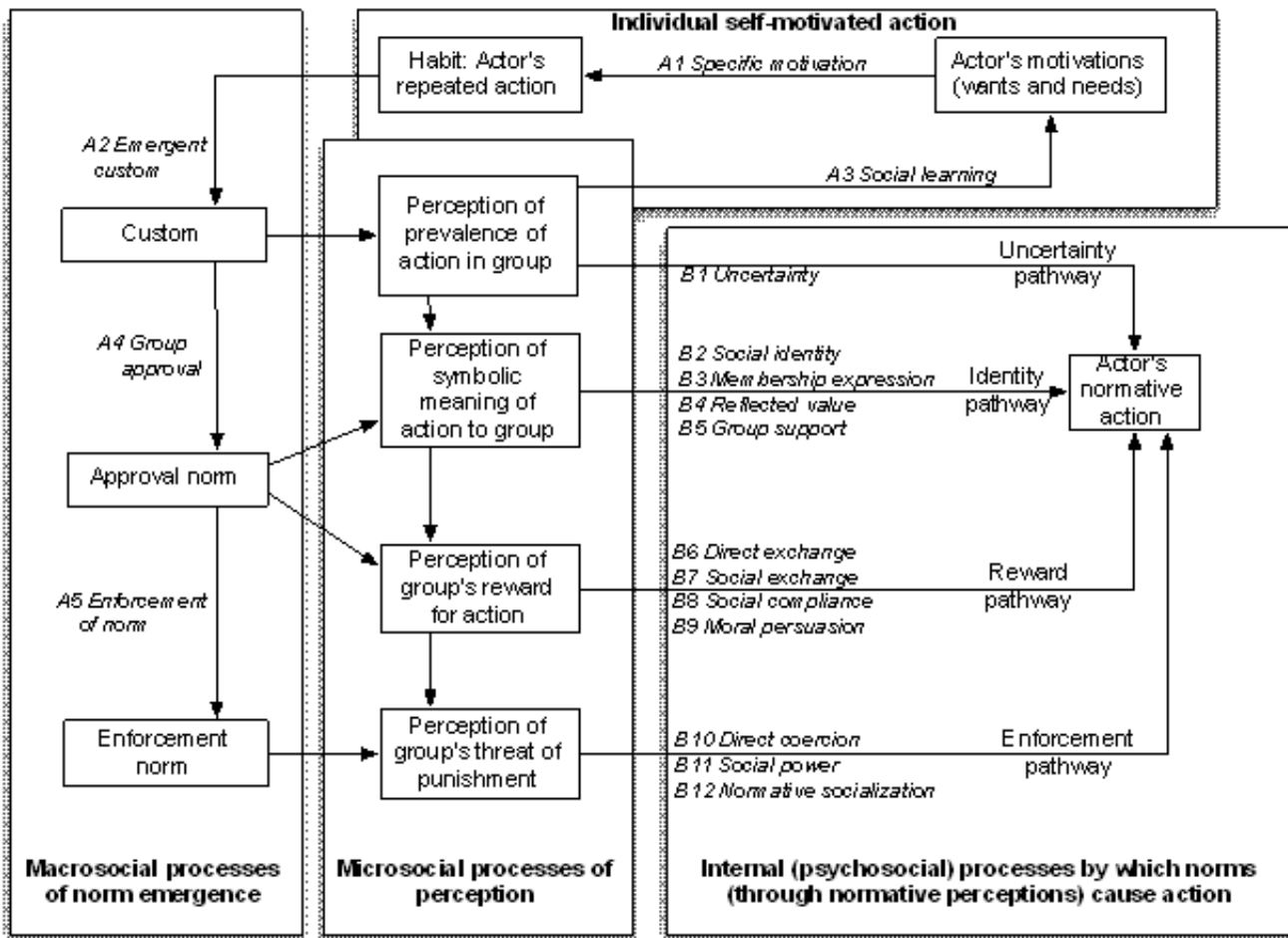


Figure 2. Social Learning Theoretical Orientation

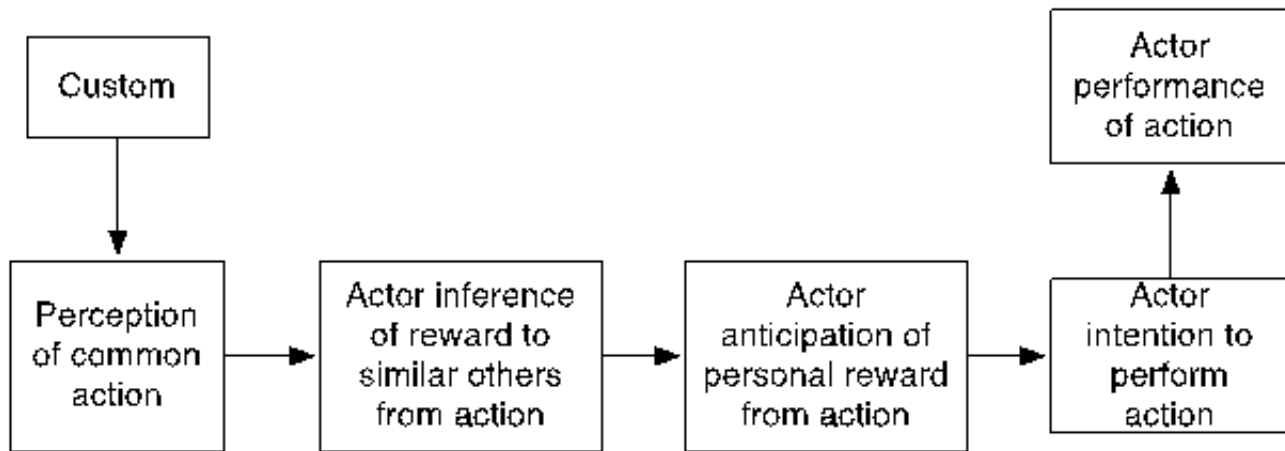


Figure 3. Social Identity Theoretical Orientation

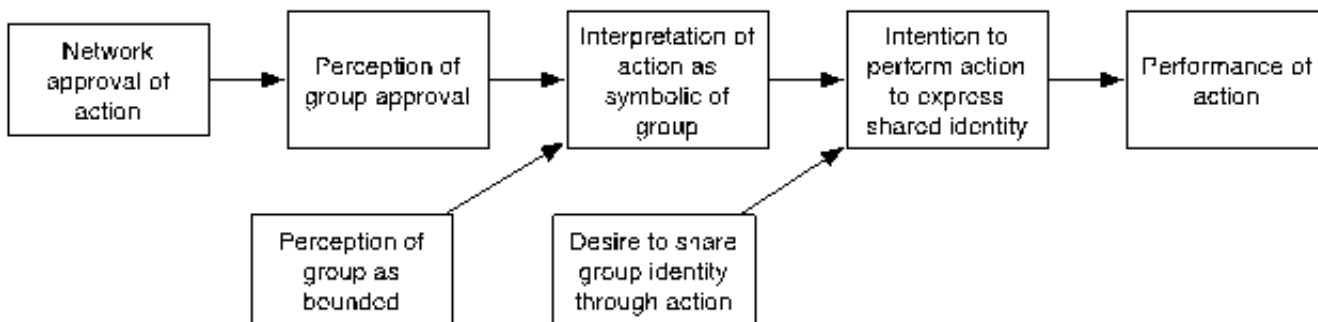


Figure 4. Reward Pathway Theoretical Orientations

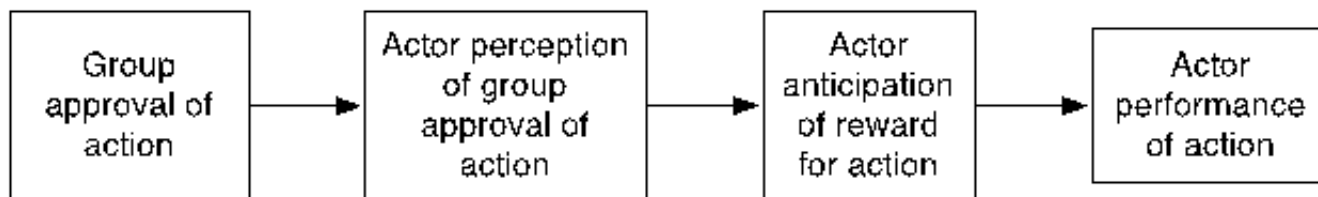


Figure 5. Enforcement Pathway Theoretical Orientations

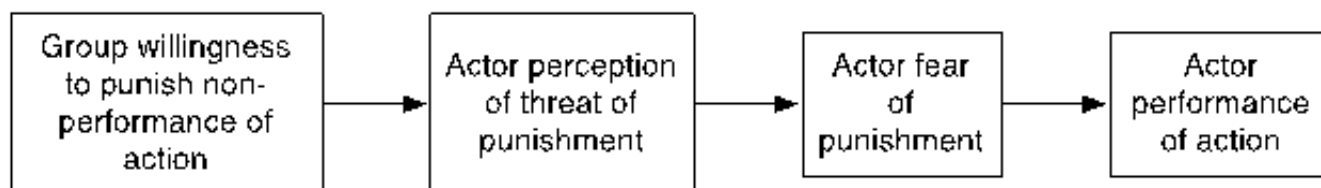


Table 1. Theoretical Orientations that Describe Norm Emergence

- A1. Specific motivation.** The greater an actor's personal motivation to produce an action, the more the actor will perform the action (This orientation has no because clause because we assume that there are many motivations that can produce a habit, and we do not at this point try to distinguish them, although we note that there are self interest, sexual (lust), fear, anger, caregiving, and attachment motivations that may motivate habitual actions).
- A2. Emergent Custom.** The more often that actors within a group perform an action, the more prevalent the action will become in the group (This is less of a causal statement than a statement of mathematics).

- A3. Social learning.** The more prevalent a customary action *and* the more relevant an actor perceives the action to the actor's current or anticipated future situation, the more the actor will perform the action, because the more prevalent the action, the more the actor will observe others satisfying their motivations by performing the action, and the more the actor will believe that performing the action will increase the satisfaction of the actor's motivation as well.
- A4. Group approval.** The greater the prevalence of an action in a group, the more the group will come to approve the action within the group, because group members will come to generalize the personal benefit of the custom to members to awareness of a general benefit to the group from the action.
- A5. Enforcement norm.** The more strongly a group approves an endorsed norm the more the group will consider the target action necessary and thus will punish actors who violate the norm, because enforcement is a method by which a group can attempt to ensure that actions beneficial to the group be enacted.

Table 2. Uncertainty Pathway Theoretical Orientation

- B1. Uncertainty.** The more prevalent a customary action *and* the more the actor is unsure about the appropriate actions that might satisfy the actor's motivations in the situation, the more the actor will perform the observed customary action, because the observed prevalence of the action will lead the actor to believe that performing the action is appropriate as an end in itself.

Table 3. Identity Pathway Theoretical Orientations

- B2. Social identity.** The more a bounded group of which an actor is a member approves an action, the more the actor will perform the action, because the group's approval of the action is perceived by the actor, and the actor infers from the perceived group approval that the action symbolizes the group. In turn, performing the action as symbol expresses the actor's shared identity with the group, and the shared identity gives meaning to the actor.
- B3. Membership expression.** The more a bounded group of which an actor is a member approves an action, the more the actor will perform the action, because the group's approval of the action is perceived by the actor, and the actor infers from the perceived group approval that the action symbolizes the group. In turn, the actor infers that performing the action will verify the actor's group membership, after which the actor expects to receive recognition, approval, and acceptance from other group members.
- B4. Reflected value.** The more a bounded group of which an actor is a member approves a

traditional action, the more the actor will perform the action, because the group's approval of the action is perceived by the actor, and the actor infers from the perceived group approval that the action symbolizes the esteem of a group with which an actor identifies. In turn, the actor infers that esteem is transferred to actions symbolic of the group, and thus that esteem will be transferred to the actor for performing the action.

B5. Group support. The more a bounded group of which an actor is a member approves an action, the more the actor will perform the action, because the group's approval of the action is perceived by the actor, and the actor infers from the perceived group approval that the action is beneficial to the group. In turn, the more the actor desires to help the group, the more the actor will perform the approved action because performing the action satisfies the actor's desire to help the group.

Table 4. Reward Pathway Theoretical Orientations

B6. Direct exchange. The more an action is preferred by a group, the more the actor will perform the action, because to the extent that the actor perceives that the group approves the action, the actor infers that the group will reward the actor for performing the approved action, and the more the actor anticipates a reward the more the actor will perform the actor in exchange for the reward.

B7. Social exchange. The more an action is preferred by a group, the more the actor will repeatedly perform the action, because to the extent that the actor perceives that the group approves the action, the greater the stream of rewards an actor infers that the group will provide for repeatedly performing the approved action. The greater the stream of rewards, the more the actor is willing to continue to perform the action in anticipation of continuing rewards.

B8. Social compliance. The more an action is preferred by a group by which the actor wants to be accepted, the more the actor will perform the action, because to the extent that the actor perceives that the group approves the action, the more the actor will expect to be accepted by group members for conformity, and the more the actor will conform in order to achieve anticipated acceptance. Some authors consider acceptance to be a reward and thus do not distinguish social exchange from social compliance.

B9. Moral persuasion. The more an action is preferred by a group, the more the actor will perform the action, because to the extent that the actor perceives that the group approves the action, the more the actor will be persuaded by the group's moral message and anticipate an internal reward from expressing these values, and the more the actor will conform to the group's shared values. The causal impact of the norm occurred during the process of persuasion. Subsequently, the action is caused by the actor's values.

Table 5. Enforcement Pathway Theoretical Orientations

- B10. Direct coercion.** The greater the willingness of the group to enforce performance of an action through punishment, the more the actor will perform the action, because the group's willingness to enforce leads to the actor's perception of the threat of punishment by the group, and the fear of punishment induces the actor to perform the action so as to avoid the negative reward of punishment.
- B11. Social power.** The greater the willingness of the group to enforce performance of an action through punishment, the more the actor will perform the action, because the group's willingness to enforce leads to the actor's perception that rewards will be withheld, and the greater the value of rewards that the actor perceives will be withheld by the group for not performing an action, the more the actor will fear the loss of rewards and this fear is the reason the actor performs the action.
- B12. Normative socialization.** The greater the willingness of the group to enforce performance of an action through punishment at an earlier time, the more the actor will perform the action, because at that earlier time when the actor was vulnerable, socialization agents within the group effectively taught the approval norm to the actor, and now the actor will give self-inflicted punishments for failure to follow the norm.

[1] We refer to the effects of norms on "action" rather than on "behavior." While norms are most often studied in terms of their effects on behavior, norms can also affect feelings and emotions (Hochschild 1983).

[2] We use the terminology of "motivation" here to refer to the source of personal action. This term is preferred for our purposes. Others use the terminology of "needs," "values," or "goals" to refer to this concept, for example when they refer to actors "meeting their needs," "expressing their values," or "reaching their goals." We do not concern ourselves with asserting whether motivations are innate or socially constructed, because we believe they are both.

[3] It might instead be taken as evidence for the influence of myth.