

## Norms

*Descriptive norms* are typical patterns of behavior, generally accompanied by the expectation that people will behave according to the pattern. *Injunctive norms* are prescriptive (or proscriptive) rules specifying behavior that persons ought (or ought not) to engage in. Such norms are usually informal, emerging from and operating through everyday social interaction, rather than enforced by the criminal justice system or other formal authority.

Most social scientists regard norms as prescriptive or proscriptive rules, but no consensus exists on the precise boundaries of the norm concept. The various definitions of the term imply different theoretical problems and different approaches to measurement. For example, many scholars include pervasive *compliance* as part of the definition of norms, and use observed uniformity in behavior as an empirical measure of norms. By this usage, a behavioral rule that people do not typically obey is not really a norm.

Most scholars also include *enforcement* as part of the definition of norms. This usage presupposes that violating a norm brings punishment (e.g., shaming of someone who behaves indecorously in public) or complying with a norm invites rewards (e.g., praise for someone who contributes generously to a group project). Observed enforcement then serves as an empirical measure of norms. By this usage, a rule that people do not typically enforce is not really a norm.

Still others regard the norm as the prescriptive or proscriptive rule itself, and see both enforcement and compliance as theoretical problems that may or may not be solved in any given case. Groups may fail to enforce norms for a variety of reasons and thus the norms may fail to regulate behavior. To resolve this problem, metanorms may emerge as second-order rules that regulate enforcement of norms.

Prominent rational choice accounts regard norms as collective goods because norms may provide solutions to problems of selfish or antisocial behavior in groups. In this usage, scholars define norms as promoting behavior that benefits the group and prohibiting behavior that harms the group. Others regard the content of norms as a phenomenon to be explained and identify conditions under which dysfunctional norms may emerge and persist.

There are a variety of accounts for why people comply with norms. It may be that people internalize norms, voluntarily obeying because they believe they ought to do so. It may be that people are motivated to conform to behavior that they see in their peers or that they are motivated to comply with the expectations of their peers. Lastly, it may be that people comply with norms because they believe that their behavior will be monitored and that sanctions will follow from their behavior, such as ostracism for violating rules of grammar in school.

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### ***Further Readings and References***

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