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Norms



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Abstract

Norms can be defined as sets of relations that define forms of communicating, feeling, acting, and thinking. They define what is allowed and what is not allowed to be said, felt, done, or thought. They are situational and relationally negotiated. Usually described in terms of their functions (descriptive, constitutive, prescriptive), the term commonly designates prescriptive guides. Norms can be more or less explicit, more or less prescriptive, and be more or less opposed and resisted. Authors mostly agree on the fundamental character of norms for human life. Operating at a collective and a psychological level, they guide and constrain human lives. And although sometimes viewed as limiting possibilities rather than creating them, they can be seen as producing a certain set of possibilities and transformed through our engagement with them in our relations to others.

Keywords

Social norms · Psychological norms ·
Development

Introduction

Human lives are filled with social and personal expectations, rules, and prescriptions. Our deepest wishes, desires and anxieties are marked by social, cultural, and relational norms. We are scared to wish for someone's company, do not dare to dream of a certain trip or get excited when imagining a radical change in our lives that we will never do. What we do is perceived, judged, and evaluated by others. A 4-year-old flying a kite, a woman speaking in public at the municipal council or a group of teenagers drinking in church can be sanctioned, frowned upon, or applauded. Judgments and evaluations based on socially shared norms leave traces in people's lives; they mark us in more or less lasting ways. Yet, the way in which norms mark us is not determining: a young kid can drop out of medical school and form a punk band and an unhappy worker can stay at his job while secretly plan a revenge from his boss. From absolute rejection to strict compliance, people are not just evaluated or perceived, and they also find all sorts of ways to deal with these norms. Norms organize our social lives and define us, but we also have a part in defining them. They are shared and socially defined, but also psychologically reconstructed and internalized. People breach this gap in different ways and change what is expected, what is normal, or what is mandatory, moving the boundaries of the possible making thinkable the unthinkable.

In the literature on norms, there are many terms that resonate with the notion of norms: laws, rules, orders, customs, and prescriptions can be considered as referring to a similar phenomenon. Different disciplines have in their own way defined the terms more or less empirically, and more or less conceptually. To address the phenomenon which is of interest here, I define in the broadest possible terms as “that which is allowed and not allowed,” in what follows, I adopt a psychological sociocultural perspective and organize the different notions around this phenomenon. I first present the anthropological definition of laws, rules, and norms and build on it to provide a disambiguation of the terms. I then review the classifications of norms that have been proposed. Thirdly, I look at the approaches interested in norm construction. I finally argue that what the studies on norms have in common is the recognition of a twofold existence, operating at a social and at a psychological level. Sociocultural psychology as a discipline is precisely concerned with the mutual constitution of the social and the psychological, and I thus propose, within this approach, to complement the definition, classification, and construction of norms in understanding their relation to the possible.

Laws, Rules, and Norms

Anthropologists’ encounters with foreign societies, where people acted very differently from what was known and expected, inaugurated a body of research that studied the characteristics of what they called “primitive” people and societies. Particularly, these differences raised the question of whether there was chaos or some type of order in how they functioned. Studies conducted by scholars such as Malinowski, Steinmetz, Durkheim, among many others, came to the conclusion that there were indeed forces creating “order, uniformity and cohesion in a savage tribe” (Malinowski 1926, p. 19) and they defined them in terms of laws, rules, and norms.

Malinowski (1926), a central figure to understand norms in anthropology, explained that the laws and traditions that regulate all human life

emerge from the “biological, mental and social needs of human nature” (Malinowski 1926, p. 20). With this claim, he enunciated the fundamental character of laws in human lives – in any society. Laws are here universal and founding of the group’s existence. Another prominent figure in the study of norms in anthropology is Claude Lévi-Strauss, who equally defined laws through their universality and founding character. He stated that “the absence of rules is a clear criteria to establish the distinction between natural and cultural processes” (Levi-Strauss 1949, p. 12). In his understanding, laws, as they are universal, pertain to natural processes, while rules and norms to cultural ones. Based on this distinction and in a language play, he termed the prohibition of incest, law of incest, as he considers it the only human norm that has the characteristics of the natural processes, sharing its universality and founding the distinction between the natural and the cultural.

Malinowski (1926) further distinguished types of rules, based on the motives that back them up. There are rules that are followed because their practical utility has been confirmed by reason and experience. Others are followed because if the person were to move away from them they would feel shame and embarrassment. There are still others, such as those regulating games that are followed because if they are not followed “the game” would be ruined. What he stated is that, in this type of rules, there are no “mental forces” or “personal interests” that could contradict them and make following them a heavy load. It is for him as easy to follow as to not follow these kinds of rules. Differently, there are other rules that are sacred and important. These are backed up by strong convictions and the possibility of supernatural sanctions that would be imparted if not followed. Different still are customs, which are norms that are implicit in everyday life activities and actions. This classification allows him to state that, aside from the law that regulates the functioning of a society, there are other types of norms and traditional mandates that are backed up by motives and forces that are mainly psychological. He thus frames rules and laws as defined

categories of the body of customs and social rules (Malinowski 1926).

Both Malinowski (1926) and Levi-Strauss (1949) were interested in understanding how order is produced in societies. Similarly, as we will see, psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan attempted a similar effort in understanding what organizes psychism. Their work on laws can be considered the corollary attempt to understand such universality in psychism. In both cases, scholars defined a constitutive function of norms in human lives (in societies or psychism) by proposing their universal character (although varied content) for defining how norms appear in each situation.

To address the phenomenon which is of interest here, that which is allowed and not allowed, in what follows, I maintain the term law for universal norms; rules for explicit norms; customs for implicit norms; and norms in themselves as relations defining forms of communicating, acting, and thinking, situational and relationally negotiated.

Classification

Across these terms, there have been attempts to classify norms depending on their function and their level of analysis (see Table 1).

When it comes to defining the function of norms, there is one main distinction that authors have made: there are prescriptive, directive or regulatory norms (Nino 2013; Searle 1997; von Wright 1963), descriptive or technical norms, and constitutive or defining norms (Searle 1997; von Wright 1963). The first and second ones organize or describe an already existing set of things, while the third defines what is considered reality, they are norms that found the very objects to which they refer. Although referring broadly to the same type of statements, the authors chose different names for them depending on the aspect of the norm they want to foreground. For example, some choose to call a norm injunctive rather than prescriptive, allowing to include also the proscriptive effect of prescriptions (Cialdini et al. 1991). To prescribe is to define which way something ought

or should be done, but with no explicit reference to what is not possible or not allowed. The word injunctive carries both the prescriptive and proscriptive aspects of guidance. If we consider the case of a child being told “you must learn to use the toilet now,” the action of using the toilet is prescribed, but that of not using diapers anymore is proscribed. Calling the norm injunctive allows pointing to impossibilities as well as possibilities but, as mentioned, the terms are chosen by the authors depending on the aspects of norms they wish to foreground.

Constitutive norms create the act they enunciate, giving it a new status or function (“X functions as A in B”). As when a white flag was decided to be symbol for truce, they transform the stick and the piece of cloth into a new object, indicating actions to those involved (stop fighting, drop your weapons). Technical norms, quite differently, are more descriptive. They do not seek to guide conduct in a certain direction but state a hypothetical situation, such as “if you wish to turn on the TV, you must press the left button.” These describe an already defined state of things and enunciate a possible course of action. Last, prescriptive norms are those, in which the speaker tries to direct the others’ behavior, inducing him to adopt a certain course of action – such as “children must brush their teeth before bed.” It may be interesting to consider that norms, which are considered constitutive at a certain point in time, may become prescriptive at another and, thus, possibly changed or contested. A group or individual might consider a norm in one or another category, as has been the case of gender differences once thought of as “natural,” increasingly revealed as socially constructed and thus possible of change.

In terms of their level of analysis, norms can be individual or social, although there is no agreement in the terminology employed – personal (Cialdini et al. 1991), perceived (Chung and Rimal 2016), individual (McKirman 1980), or subjective (Kelsen 2003); as per the social, authors refer to collective (Chung and Rimal 2016), societal (McKirman 1980; Sherif 1936), or de-psychologized (Kelsen 2003) norms.

Across these propositions, norms have then been distinguished in terms of their function

Norms, Table 1 Perspectives on norms

		Function		
		Prescriptive, regulatory, injunctive	Descriptive, technical	Constitutive, determining Institutional
Level of analysis	Social Collective Group	i.e., “people must cross the street when the light is green”	i.e., “if you want to turn on the TV, press the left button”	i.e., prohibition of incest
		von Wright, Searle, Winther-Lindqvist, Moscovici, Jodelet, Malinowski, Cialdini et al.	von Wright, Cialdini et al.	von Wright, Searle, Levi-Strauss, Butler, Malinowski
	Individual Psychological Perceived Personal	i.e., “girls cannot play cowboys”		i.e., threat of castration
		Piaget, Tomassello, Vygotsky, Harris, Winther-Lindqvist		Searle, Levi-Strauss, Freud, Lacan, Butler

(constitutive or regulatory) and defined as statements (explicit or not) guiding or prescribing conduct in a certain direction. The authors’ claims can be interpreted as proposing that, as some of the norms are constitutive, they are creating a certain field of possibilities; while the others merely provide order to such constituted states.

Norm Construction

I will now consider the approaches not interested in defining or classifying norms, but in their construction and development. Social, cultural, and developmental psychology, as well as psychoanalysis, provide different contributions to understanding such processes.

Norms as Frames of Reference

Sherif’s (1936) pioneer work on the psychology of social norms was one of the first attempts to study norms at a psychological level. He showed, in an experimental setting, that there are frames of reference from which we interpret a task or understand a situation that are socially constructed. These frames are for him defined by social norms that can be contextually available or individually created. In the presence of an ambiguous stimulus, such as a moving dot of white light in a dark room, the person will either use situational queues to make sense of why it moves, or create relations with prior experiences to interpret

it. What Sherif’s experiments showed is that “if no norm exists in an uncertain and ambiguous situation, then individuals generate one such that their judgments do have a reference point” (Abrams and Levine 2012, p. 55). These norms can be “values, customs, stereotypes and conventions” (Sherif 1936, p. 6), among others, and can change for example, if a person is alone or within a group. For him what is commonly understood in psychology, as “variation in culture” is merely a variation of a frame of reference, made of social norms, relationally and situationally constructed.

Other social psychologists who studied norms, such as Asch (1951) and Milgram (1963), were interested in when and where certain norms or rules were followed, ignored, or transgressed; however, Sherif asked the more fundamental question of how norms were constructed. It is the presence of others, the presence or absence of elements in the situation that could be linked to the perceived phenomenon that participate to the creation of norms and to the frames of reference that are used to interpret the situation.

Normalisation in Groups

Serge Moscovici (1974) termed “normalization” the process through which norms are constructed at a group level. The definition of this process echoes Sherif’s (1936) idea that in small groups, norms and frames of references become established through convergence of the members’ view toward consensus. Yet, normalization here

does not designate the person's conformity to norm as Sherif considered, but conformity to pressure toward group uniformity (Cohen 1978; Moscovici 1974). Moscovici and Faucheux (1972) label normalization and conformity, two processes that can be alternative styles of dealing with norms. As Cohen (1978) puts it:

Normalization contributes to the operation of group norms because pressures toward uniformity lead to the crystallization of norms in the first place (. . .) norm formation is itself a type of conformity, then the overall conformity process has two parts: (1) the development of norms through pressures toward uniformity, and (2) the operation of established norms. (Cohen 1978, p. 443)

Group norms can then operate both as frames of reference structuring people's interpretations of situations and as rules or ideals governing what members ought to and are expected to do and think.

Psychic Roots of Social Norms

Other studies on the construction of rules and prohibitions in societies refer to the fact that groups build shared prohibited actions, topics, or themes through practices and collective discourses, and that some of these remain unspoken or undone because of their psychological roots.

For instance, Denise Jodelet (1989) studied how a community dealt with "madness," notably by creating a social separation between the "madman" and the "sane." She identified that to accomplish this separation there were institutionalizing and signifying practices. The first ones defined prohibitions around the mad persons – for instance, it was not possible to mix the laundry of the "mad" and the "sane." The second support prohibitions through different representations – the mix is not allowed because there was a risk of pollution as the "mad" person is "dirty." Between these two types of practices, Jodelet (1989) argued there was "something private." This "something private" was, for her, related to villagers' experience of the threat of the loss of individuality. There was a real fact – the encountering of other people, and differences with them. But villagers spoke of contagion, of the impurity of the other's body, of a kind of pollution through

contact that evoked, she claimed, the sexual, bodily, phantasmatic aspect of fusion of bodies, or the loss of individuality at a more profound level. In other words, she made the hypothesis that there is a defensive psychic root of this institutional instauration of a social difference.

Psychoanalysis, while exploring the unconscious (Roudinesco 2007) also defined the psychic roots of norms. Freud (1923) proposed there is a psychic instance, named the Superego, which is the moral instance of the psyche. The Superego is considered the place from where feelings of guilt emerge; it establishes how the subject should behave, think, and feel (Freud 1923). From a genetic perspective, this instance is the result of the abandonment of the real-life investment of the parental figures. This abandonment is actually an internalization of these figures, and the emergence, psychologically, of an instance that substitutes their function. Freud claims that the very intense feelings toward the parental figures young children display are abandoned because of the dangers they could bring – it is expected that the child diversifies his objects of affection and substitutes the sole love for parents by other members of the group. Such an abandonment is, from this perspective, founding for the psychological organization itself.

If we take the terminology defined before, the impossibility to have sexual relations or erotic feelings toward the parental figures can be considered a law, a constitutive or institutional rule, as it found the way in which psychism is organized.

In the Lacanian return to Freud, the ways in which such a conflict – between the drive directed at the parental figures, and the prohibition of such relation – is resolved by defining a universal relation of the subject to the law. In each situation, this resolution defines a specific way of dealing with rules and constructing norms. The possible solutions are repression, renegation, and forclusion (Lacan 1958). For instance, the repression of the so-called law of the father, that is, the impossibility to marry one's mother, leads to all sorts of neurotic solutions. In obsessive neuroses, people transform desires and wishes into imperative demands; while in hysteria, they escape and avoid all imperatives, turning situations in which

the person has to comply to certain rules into an occasion of escape or disrupt the state of things (Lacan 1956). The “renegation” of the law in perversions has clinical consequences of persistent violation of rules, whether littering in public or flashing people on the street. The more complicated relation to such a law is the one that appears in psychosis, in which the law is foreclosed, meaning it never had an inscription. Here, there was never a constitution of an internal regulatory instance also is in charge of an analysis of reality (Freud 1923, 2001), and therefore, norms and rules can emerge from internal drives, undistinguished from external demands, as the way in which the whole world is experienced has been defined differently.

In all, psychoanalysis has contributed to understanding how constitutive or founding a law can be for psychism. But while it shows where laws and our relations to norms come from, the rigidity of claiming the solutions are universal does not take into account the people’s life course or the contexts that change and in which people develop. While there might be “styles” or abstracted forms of dealing with norms, specific social situations change and how we view the world also changes, making it difficult to speak of universality. Social situations, demands, and expectations vary, and these general styles, as they come from an internalization of social materials, might also change.

The Development of Rules and Norms

In developmental psychology, some scholars have tried to understand not the social construction of norms or their psychological roots, but their emergence and development in people’s lives across time.

Piaget’s was concerned with the construction of rules in children’s games (Piaget 1932). For Piaget, the child will accept a new rule in a game because he thinks that he has discovered a pre-existing rule – a rule pertaining to the established world of rules by the “Word of the Adult” (1932, p. 45). The child’s encounter with a new situation necessarily carries the weight of interpretation from his or her whole “moral life” (Piaget 1932). This means that whenever encountering a new object, game, or situation, this experience is

made on the basis of the fact that the world is “morally” organized: that there are some things which we can and cannot do, some things which are right and wrong, in one word, the world is normative (Valsiner 2018). There is an initial identification of what is (the real) and what must be (the normative) (Piaget 1981).

More generally, Piagetian and post-Piagetian approaches analyzed the role of conflict for norm construction or change (Zapiti and Psaltis 2012). These authors show how multiply operating norms can enter into contradictions. A little girl might usually play under the norm that “knights are characters for boys” but when playing knights against monsters, she might consider not abiding by that norm in order to avoid being the monster as “the ugly character” or “on the losing side.” This might be a way in which flexibility in our relations to the norms is introduced.

From the sociocultural perspective, Lev Vygotsky (2016) was also concerned with norms, and he considered them behavioral rules, which he calls “don’ts.” These can be social (interdictions), physical (things which go against physical rules, like lighting a match a second time), and biological (the fact that we cannot touch fire because we will get burnt). He argued that these diverse “don’ts” eventually combine in a single “situational don’t,” which can be understood as a barrier blocking the emergence of a specific action within that situation. Thus, when a child pretends to fly on a broom with a stick, there is a temporary suspension of a physical “don’t” – the child is not “actually” flying – but a social “don’t” marks the stick is not a horse but a broom as the child could equally be playing with a broom to ride a horse or a magic broom.

Winther-Lindqvist (2009) presents these authors’ approaches as considering rules as either prescriptive or sociocultural practices. For Piaget (1932), rules would be prescriptive regulations, whereas for Vygotsky, they are defined as sociocultural practices, indicating that “all social life and human interactions are governed by implicit social rules” (Winther-Lindqvist 2009, p. 22). This distinction does not appear to be mutually excluding, as norms can be socioculturally

defined as well as function as prescriptive. I will now consider this sociocultural definition.

The Social and the Psychological

If we consider norms are sociocultural and psychologically defined, I propose to review and adopt the sociocultural perspective for their understanding. Guided mainly by a processual interest to understand change, this approach allows looking at the dynamics of passage from the social to the psychological level at which norms operate, and vice versa.

As a discipline, cultural and sociocultural psychology is concerned with studying human development as a social and cultural process (Cole 1996; Valsiner 1997, 2000, 2019b). One of its core premises is that this takes place through social guidance (Valsiner 1997, 2014; Zittoun et al. 2013). Children learn to manipulate a spoon and avoid plugs, parents come to know how to speak to teachers and teenagers starting university discover how to write formal letters. These paths or ways of doing can be more or less imperative: a child can never touch a plug but a teenager can decide to provocatively write an informal essay to make a point. This process of social guidance has a fundamentally normative character (Valsiner 2018) and the normative weight of each action is defined within the situation and between the people involved.

Jaen Valsiner (2019b) claims that it is only by looking at how they are constructed, by people, in relation to other people and in a shared environment that we can understand why norms are fundamental for the functioning of any social group or collective. In this approach, norms are considered “cultural tools – made possible by sign mediation – that mediate the personal and collective movement towards the immediate future” (Valsiner 2018, p. 10). He further claims that all human psychological phenomena are normative (Valsiner 2018). It is considered to be what sets human systems apart from others and that “the normativity of the psyche is the developmental result of the interiorization processes from the materials available in the social environment – but not reducible to the latter” (Valsiner 2018, p. 9). Thus, from social normativity, the

psychological normativity comes from internalizing, through the available material, a certain way of establishing relations between things – “when I see the sun comes up, I must wake up,” relating my looking at the sun, to getting out of bed.

Normative systems, at a social level, such as how one is expected to behave at work or brush one’s teeth, are considered to be socially crystalized (Zittoun et al. 2003) in everyday-life arrangements. The ways in which desks are set in an office and the types of objects that can be found – pens and paper, clips, computers, while no drinking glasses, party dresses or costumes – provide guidance of what things are or are not possible in each setting.

Formally, such social guidance is understood as made of semiotic constraints. Drawing on Lewin’s (1936) model of fields of possible movement, Valsiner defines constraints as what creates partitions in a field of otherwise indeterminate possibilities (Valsiner 1998, p. 50). In that sense, norms are derived from constraints creating the “bounded indeterminacy” of developmental processes: they create directions for development, which are not imposed, but orient the infinity of possible forms. Norms are then generalizations from the repeated encounters with such constraints and can be defined as emerging configurations or sets of relations.

But norms are not simply there: they are constructed through experience. By playing, children test their limits, explore their boundaries and appropriate them depending on their consequences. Through imagination, adults engage with their transgression, their enforcement in an unfair situation or their transformation to avoid a social catastrophe. More so, through thinking, arguing, discussing, people give form and transform statements and scenarios. We can engage with a foreign world while sitting in a small windowless apartment and then feel better about our confinement, or yet decide to breach it and leave. These are processes that can explain how they change and emerge both at a social and a psychological level – and they have been a central part of sociocultural psychological research (Valsiner 2019a).

Norms and the Possible

Across the perspectives revised, I tried to show that authors always distinguish between a social and a psychological level at which norms function. Secondly, the focus on different questions in the authors' propositions can be read as giving rise to static or dynamic depictions of how norms emerge and define what is possible. The definitions and classifications provided in anthropology (Levi-Strauss 1949; Malinowski 1926), philosophy, legal studies (Kelsen 2003; Nino 2013; Searle 1997) and social psychological research (Cialdini et al. 1991) specify which kinds of norms exist but open up the question of their change and emergence. Social, cultural, and developmental psychologies (Valsiner 1997, 1998; Zittoun et al. 2013) as well psychoanalysis (Freud 1923; Lacan 1956, 1958) start from a processual outlook asking first about the psychological processes that allow their construction. Yet, for some of these authors, the possible appears to be defined by the law and the norms. They also determine what is impossible, what is thus sanctioned, leading to a rigid understanding of possibilities that do not appear to be open for change.

From a sociocultural perspective, we can articulate the twofold existence of norms and the processes that allow their construction. Socially, norms guide our behavior; psychologically, they form the way in which we think, feel, and speak. They become the points of reference from which we experience our lives and shape our future. But if the sociocultural norm merely guides what is psychologically reconstructed, and in specific situations, then there appears to be a large margin of freedom in our relations to them. The possible can be played with and imagined: children alter and change norms in imagined scenarios to push the limits of the possible; adults fantasize and imagine plays on norms; forms of social participation such as direct democracy allow people to create initiatives that question the norms underlying the laws, and proposing new ones – such as the instauration of women's right to vote. These engagements both define and redefine what is possible, moving and transforming its boundaries.

Every time a norm is constructed, reality is actualized in a certain way, and possibilities reorganize. What we consider allowed also defines fields of possibilities. We can engage with such possibilities, either without realizing them or by changing the current state of things. We can explore the possible, alone and with others, and this exploration might show us some possible paths, further changing current conditions, and might lead to also generalizing new norms, in an intertwined spiral of norms and possibilities.

Cross-References

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