Published in final edited form as:

J Fam Theory Rev. 2015 March 1; 7(1): 28–46. doi:10.1111/jftr.12059.

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, as suggested by our failure 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. 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 and the processes such theories assert.

Keywords

Custom; norm enforcement; social norms; theory

The importance of social norms is one of the strongest themes in social science, especially sociology (Gibbs, 1965; Horne, 2001b), and it is particularly prevalent in family and relationship theory. Social norms are most often seen as a mechanism for social control (Parsons, 1951). Some norms are seen as prosocial standards that promote action beneficial to society (Hechter, 1987; Hechter & Opp, 2001a; Homans, 1974; Horne, 2001b). These include the institutionalization of marriage norms (Cherlin, 2004; Lauer & Yodanis, 2010), the transition to marriage (Marini, 1984), and parental care of children (Baumrind, 1991; Hendrick, Hendrick, & Logue, 2010). Other norms are seen as having negative consequences, such as female beauty norms (Allaz, Berstein, Rouget, Arch, & Morabia, 1998; Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, & Thompson, 1980) and weight norms (Baker, Little, & Brownell, 2003; Croker, 2008; Story, Neumark-Sztainer, & French, 2002). Still other norms are seen as promoting action preferred within smaller groups, such as drinking 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 normative 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, Goldstein, & Griskevicius,

2008). Marini (1984), for example, notes the frequent and inappropriate use of normative theory to account for the transition to adulthood and marriage, echoing Elder (1975).

In this article, we undertake a review of the literature on social norms to identify many of the large number of proposed social mechanisms by which norms fulfill the function of social control. We undertake this task first by emphasizing the importance of testing proposed normative processes, and second by being precise in our use of normative terminology. The purpose is to offer some clarification on 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 formulate 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. With this background, we attempt to be explicit about the logic of normative explanations; we do this by formulating theoretical orientations that correspond to the major proposed explanations of normative effects. In this article, we engage only with theories that claim that norms have a direct causal impact on action; we do not engage with theories that have other explanations for action.

Normative Explanations

Briefly, a norm is a widely shared expectation about action. This expectation may be passive, as in expectations about customary or approved action, or active, as in enforced expectations. In the usage that we follow here, customs, approval norms, and enforcement norms are group-level phenomena, so when we use the noun *norm*, we are referring to such group-level phenomena. We 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 they are not conceptualized here as *norms* themselves.

Norm researchers have proposed many different social mechanisms by which norms are said to affect action (see, e.g., the discussion in Gross, 2009).¹ Unfortunately, despite the large number of proposed explanations and the large number of studies collecting data on 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, such as norms around condom use for sexual disease protection (DiClemente, 1991; Maticka-Tyndale, 1991; White, Terry, & Hogg, 1994). Unfortunately, such an association does not distinguish the case in which the study participant's action is caused by the customary action of others from the case in which both the study participant and those exhibiting the action are motivated by a common factor such as self-protection or partner protection. Similarly, many related studies have found a statistical association between a common approval of an action (indicated by a perception that peers approve the action) and a study participant's performance of the action (Fishbein et al., 1995; Maticka-Tyndale, 1991). Again, however, this association does not distinguish the case in which the

¹We refer to the effects of norms on *action* rather than on *behavior*. Although norms are most often studied in terms of their effects on behavior, norms can also affect feelings and emotions at work and in the family (Hochschild, 1983; Wharton & Erickson, 1995).

study participant's action is caused by the customary approval of others from the case in which 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 correlational and even experimental studies is that they assume at least part of 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 those others and I have the same motivation for performing the action (a nonnormative 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 self-perpetuating tautology that excludes individual choice. Most of us may have eaten breakfast this morning, but this common action may have been caused by our individual hunger (or the anticipation of that hunger encoded into our habit of eating breakfast) 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., whether 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 and resulting selection of partners (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 the actor 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.

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 parents treat their children with respect" or "Parents should treat their children with respect." Of course, a norm so stated is a constant, and in introductory statistics we learn that a constant cannot predict a variable, and thus a constant cannot explain variation in a phenomenon. However, if we compare one group, culture, or subculture in which very many parents treat their children with respect every day with another group, culture, or subculture in which fewer parents treat their children with respect, then the *prevalence* of parental respect can be asserted to explain some variable phenomenon, such as child disciplinary problems. A norm such as "People should brush their teeth" is the same for everyone. People who brush and people who don't confront the same norm, so it is not the norm that can explain the difference. It is the variation in the

strength with which a norm is advocated, the size or centrality of the group that espouses the norm, the meaning the norm has for the identity of a group, or the forcefulness of a threat of punishment that explains the effect of a norm on an action, if the norm has such an effect. For example, Helms, Supple, and Proulx (2011) note the variability in the extent to which Mexican Americans espouse family-related norms.

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

- The prevalence of an action in a group (Marini, 1984). 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 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 normative terms are sometimes used in the literature, such as *personal norms*, self-based expectations for action that come from internalized values (Cialdini & Trost, 1998).

Theoretical Orientations

In this article, 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 (a theoretical orientation) and its application to particular social phenomena (a theory). 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 (Bell, 2009), each theoretical orientation if well formed is logically true (Carnap, 1956). And because a well-formed 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 claim no 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 earlier, 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 later in this article).

A theoretical orientation is not just about the relation between two concepts. It is more importantly about the process (Bell, 2009; Hage, 1972) or mechanism (Gross, 2009) that causally links the concepts. A theory applies the process of an orientation to an empirical context, so every theory is properly a T theory of P, where T is a theoretical orientation and P is the phenomenon being explained (Merton, 1967). Each orientation has limits in its applicability to particular research questions, and thus a limited theoretical scope. For example, a direct coercion theory of parenting might be empirically supported for a subset of parents who fear the intervention of Child Protective Services but not for other parents. There are likely to be parents whose level of child care is explained by a social identity theory of parenting, in which parents who perceive middle-class values as approving involved and supportive child care are seen as performing such child care in order to present themselves as members of the middle class. And there are certainly a vast number of parents whose parenting behavior is largely explained by a nonnormative theory around their love of the child (Bell, 2010). Each of the outcome orientations we discuss describes a process by which an individual actor chooses an action under the influence of a norm. It is possible and even likely that different actors from the same population will be influenced at different levels or by different processes. And of course norms and processes that benefit one actor or group may disadvantage another actor or group.

A thorough test of any of these theories demands a test of the process as well as a test of the epistemic correlation between the starting concept (e.g., prevalence or perception of a custom, approval norm, or enforcement norm) and the ending concept (an individual's action). 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 here, many different theories, each with a different explanatory process, can potentially account for the same covariation. Thus, a test of this covariation is in effect equally a test of *all* the different theories that might predict the covariation and as a result confirms none of them (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 organize our discussion according to three of the normative concepts we have described already: customs, approved norms, and enforcement norms. Figure 1 displays the concepts we describe here and distinguishes types of theoretical orientations discussed herein.

We describe normative orientations in varying detail in the sections that follow, as we do not have space to fully describe all of them. We classify these orientations as A origin orientations, which describe the causal processes by which norm concepts arise, and B outcome orientations, which 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 outcome orientations as B_n , where n is an ordinal integer.

Figure 1 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. This section privileges the sociological concern with shared values that solve the problem of social order. Next to this is a section that depicts processes by which actors come to perceive social norms and customs. Social psychologists are generally concerned with norms only after they have been encoded as perceptions. 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 we have already described, 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, A2, A4, and A5, to account for the origin of customs and social norms, and two theoretical orientations, A3 and B1, which explain how customs, once they have emerged, have an effect on action (Tables 1 and 2).

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 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

²We 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, as 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. One reviewer has noted that random actions might “stick” for a given actor and become habits, but they become customs only if many actors find them useful or gratifying.

support from a partner, or some other motivation (Bell, 2009, 2010). The first time an actor performs an action, he or she does so 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 as representing a different orientation for each potential motivation. It includes theoretical approaches that focus on habit (or habitus) and practice (Bourdieu, 1990; Gross, 2009; Swidler, 1986) in which the original emotional, cognitive, or normative impetus for action has become submerged within routine.

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 Sumner (1906) described, these actions become common well before they are *recognized* as common. For example, mothers in every mammalian species care for their young. The biological process that produces care in all mammalian species presumably also causes human mothers to care for their young (Bell, 2010; Panksepp, 1998). From this behavior emerges the custom of human maternal care. 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 and Gross's (2009) description of social mechanisms. 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 refer to a custom as 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 (orientation A3) suggests how a custom, without having a continuing causal effect on an individual's action, can contribute to the actor's initial motivation to perform the action. The second (orientation B1) suggests another route by which a custom can have a momentary or continuing causal impact 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 (Figure 2). 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 he or she 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 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, this 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); in this formulation, 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.

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. In Figure 2, the feedback arrow from the actor's performance of the action to the actor's anticipation of reward represents this transition from a decision based on others' action to self-motivated action. Thus, while social learning can be a critical stage in normative influence, it is unlikely to have a continuing direct normative influence. A new parent may learn directly by observation of other parents or indirectly by instruction from a nurse how to hold an infant securely; but henceforth she will continue to use this method because it is effective and not because she feels constrained to follow a customary practice.

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 reified as an *approval 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, 2004). This approval may take a purely passive form or may be expressed actively and publically. In many forms, the recommendation of the action takes on a moral tone. New parents often experience unsolicited advice from strangers on the "proper" care of children.

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 may be a relatively passive desire that the action be performed or may involve active expressions of approval. 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 ("It is good to do X") is transformed into an *enforcement norm* ("Do X or else") 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. Actors who were previously motivated to perform the action for rewards will presumably

continue to be rewarded, but actors who did not receive rewards or for whom the rewards were not sufficient may be motivated to perform the action under the threat of punishment. Public institutions such as Child Protective Services have been created to achieve this goal in regard to a relatively small number of parents. Orientations that describe the coercive power of social norms have been common, and in fact some authors 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, 2001b, p. 5) 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, p. 152), where *constrain* suggests coercion and *guide* indicates simple approval.

Outcome Pathways

There appear to be four families of pathways formed of theoretical orientations that assert how a social norm or normative concept can 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. First-time parents often feel uncertain and unprepared with the demands of a new infant. Under this uncertainty they can be particularly receptive to information about what other parents are doing. This uncertainty process is common in cases where normal social structure has been abrogated and the actor adopts an emerging custom (Sherif, 1964).

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; Cancian, 1975; Thoits & Virshup, 1997). Table 3 describes four theoretical orientations that represent variations of the identity pathway (B2 social identity to B5 group support). For example, parents may choose to adopt father and mother identities, which they reinforce in each other according to societal expectations for their roles (Adamsons, 2010).

Identity pathway orientations are described in Table 1: B2 social meaning identity theoretical orientation (Boer & Westhoff, 2006; Stets & Burke, 2000); B3 membership-expression identity 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 identity theoretical orientation (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and B5 group-support identity theoretical orientation (Kitts, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Where the social meaning identity orientation expresses the actor’s borrowed sense “who I am,” the membership-expression identity orientation expresses “where I belong,” the reflected-value identity orientation expresses “where my worth comes from,” and the group-support identity orientation expresses “whom I want to support.”

B5: Group-support identity theoretical orientation—Adhering to traditional action that symbolizes the group can be perceived by the actor as an indicator that the action is beneficial to the group. The group-support effect is increased when the actor feels that he or she shares a common fate with the group (Brewer & Kramer, 1986; De Cremer & Van Vugt, 1999; Tajfel, 1981). 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 support the group, to increase the group’s status or success. Adopting those actions to support the group verifies the actor’s identity as a group member (Kitts, 2006; Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

In a test of a group support identity theory of child intergroup attitudes, Nesdale and Lawson (2011) conducted an experiment involving 383 Australian children in Grades 1–6. In the experiment they manipulated the norms that each child believed applied to their school and their in-group. “Given the importance of peer group membership to children, [they are] motivated to maintain, if not enhance, the status or standing of their group” (Nesdale & Lawson, 2011, p. 1595). The manipulation of the in-group norm was an audio clip purportedly from an in-group member saying that if the child wanted to be a member of the in-group, he or she must follow a stated norm of liking or disliking the out-group. The school norm manipulation was a statement by the experimenter that the principal and teacher like children to like children in other groups. Results showed that children’s attitudes toward out-group members were significantly associated with the presence of both in-group and school norms to accept or reject out-group members (and a validity check showed that children accurately perceived those norms). The authors conclude that the results support their theory even though they collected no information on whether the children were following the norm in order to enhance the status of their in-group or school. Some results did not seem to support the theory: Children were found to like their in-group less when the

group norm was to dislike the out-group. It was not clear why this should happen if children's motivation was to enhance the status of their in-group.

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, p. 333), "what people should and should not do given social surroundings and circumstances" (Hechter & Opp, 2001a, n.p.), and "standards of behavior based on widely shared beliefs how individual group members ought to behave" (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004, p. 185). 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 in which the group monitors the actor's action and responds positively to the actor's performance of the approved action. 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. 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.

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 tied to each single performance of the action (Coleman, 1990). For the social exchange orientation, the actor anticipates 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). Within social exchange logic, transactions tend to be dyadic: one actor exchanges with one other actor. However, because the two sides of the transaction are separated in time (e.g., Actor A gives a reward to Actor B at time one, but it is not until a later time that B provides a corresponding benefit to A). What makes this exchange work is the social norm of reciprocity that is supported by the group. In a Dutch sample of 349 elder parents and 812 adult children, Geurts, Poortman, and van Tilburg (2012) reported that adult sons were more likely to provide support to their elder parents when they had previously received support from those parents. However, this effect was not significant for adult daughters. The authors conclude: "According to social exchange theory, child-care provision thus creates a debt with sons that leads to reciprocation later in life in order to restore the cost-benefit balance within the relationship" (Geurts et al., 2012, p. 247). They interpret the covariation of parent reward and adult child benefit as supporting the social reward theory. The validity of this conclusion is mitigated by a failure to collect information on parents' or adult children's awareness of unfulfilled obligation. For example, did the sons experience a feeling of debt that the daughters did not experience?

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 previous discussion on the uncertainty orientation) and is usually applied to contexts in which 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

Although 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 *approving* the action to *requiring* the action and sanctioning noncompliance. The group develops punishments by which the group threatens to intervene actively to enforce the norm.

The three orientations along the enforcement pathway follow a similar logic. For each orientation, the actor's perception of the group's willingness to punish the actor for noncompliance raises the actor's fear of punishment, and this fear in turn motivates compliance. 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. Recognizing that fear is a variable concept that ranges from paralyzing terror at one end to mild concern and discomfort at the other, this perception activates the actor's fear of punishment, and that fear motivates the actor's performance of the action.

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 external 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- or 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 a positive personal motivation to perform the action but is directly constrained against following the actor's personal preference by the internal threat of self-punishment.

Stutzer and Lalive (2004) provide a test of a normative social power theory of employment. The study is concerned with the results of a nationwide referendum in Switzerland in 1997. The normative variable is the level of support for punishing actors who do not follow the norm of working by withdrawing rewards from them. The strength of the norm was measured by the proportion of voters in communities in Switzerland who voted to reduce

unemployment benefits. The authors measured norm compliance through a survival analysis of more than 76,000 persons who became unemployed soon after the referendum. Results showed that the strength of the norm to work had a significant positive effect on workers' transitions to employment, even after controlling for a series of possible confounders. Of course, in general one can expect workers to be more vigorous in searching for work when their benefits are cut, but on top of this general economic motivation, Stutzer and Lalive found that the unemployment period was shorter in areas where there was a stronger norm.

Additional Considerations

Each of the theoretical orientations we have presented so far has asserted 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; 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. It might instead be taken as evidence for the influence of myth. 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 article, 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 and Trost's (1998) description of a process by which a custom ("descriptive norm" for them) is perceived 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. Rimal and Real (2003) suggest that perceived custom moderates 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 apply only 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.

Implications of Normative Theory

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, perhaps because it would suggest that, for all our love, we are not satisfied with our beloved. This paragraph is intended to be metaphorical, and yet it appears to describe an uncomfortable pattern in research on norms.

When we do test normative theories, we attempt only the safest, weakest tests. It is all too frequent that researchers describe some normative logic that connects a normative concept to an action, as in the examples presented earlier, 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 norm: 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 or identity or coercion. 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 the cause of those things. 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 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 article 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 (Bell & Cox, 2011).

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. It might be particularly useful to test multiple processes simultaneously, especially in cases where different and conflicting normative processes—or different norms—are thought to be in operation.

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 article, have taken courses and read literature on theory. And yet we are not willing to claim that our work on this article was *caused* by this training. The training did provide the backdrop and the opportunity to work on the article, but we trace the cause of the article 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 word *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 a nonnormative attachment and caregiving theory of heterosexual dating. Each of these theories is falsifiable—thus the importance of *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 (Bell, 2009). 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 proactively testing 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—or 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 (Bell, 2010). The nonnormative 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 (1906) and Wrong (1994), 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 here. But other common customs, it is clear, are created by nonnormative processes. In Figure 1, there are two boxes, “Actor’s repeated action” and “Actor’s normative action,” and these 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 nonnormative motivational cause.

For these reasons, we recommend more conservative vocabulary for talking about customs. We believe that calling them customs instead of descriptive norms is 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 that 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 of 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. This reasoning suggests that 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), a sense of pleasure or a feeling of camaraderie, not—or not mainly—through normative (social pressure) processes.
- Maybe dyadic interaction with a romantic partner causes actors to examine or reexamine their own values, and then actors choose their actions on the basis of their values. Or maybe not.

Each of these points poses the choice between a normative explanation and a nonnormative 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 noncausative 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 article 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.

Acknowledgments

Work on this article was supported in part by Grant No. R01 HD055826 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, principal investigator David C. Bell. The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions of Anne Mitchell and Dwight Cooper to this article. Opinions expressed here are solely those of the authors.

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Figure 1.
Normative concepts and theoretical orientations.

Figure 2.
Social learning theoretical orientation.

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 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.

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Table 3

Identity-pathway theoretical orientations

B2: Social meaning 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 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, 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 identity. 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 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 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 action 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 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 that 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.