⊕ GROUP NORMS

Group norms are the standards that largely govern behavior within a group. The norms may be explicit and carefully recorded for all future members to see and learn, but just as often they might be implicit, in which case transmission to a new member will be dependent upon the ability and motivation of senior group members to accurately convey the norm. Norms have a strong influence on group-based behavior and are difficult to change. More troublesome for the group leader who wants to alter a group norm, implicit norms can be difficult to even detect.

THE INFLUENTIAL POWER OF NORMS

All groups have some system of norms that govern the behavior of its members. Indeed, a normless group would be chaotic and anarchic because there would be no boundaries for proper behavior. Norms help group members determine what to do in unfamiliar situations, and for many groups norms are vital to their very success—many companies would go bankrupt if the norm "do your job well" did not exist, for example. Norms of course exist in large groups and societies, but small groups that exist within these larger ones also have their own sets of norms, and these norms can, and often do, exist at odds with those of the larger group. For example, many retailers have policies against male employees wearing facial hair, though society as a whole takes no position on whether beards are appropriate. Within a group of delinquents, it may be acceptable to shoplift. Further, norms can be formal, in that they are officially and unambiguously recorded for all members to see, or informal, in that they are held in the collective conscious but not permanently recorded. Informal norms are at once harder to detect, more susceptible to inaccurate transmission, and more likely to change than formal norms. Examples of informal norms abound. Societal groups maintain many such norms regarding fashion, for example. What is considered a fashionable hairstyle for a woman changes frequently, yet there is never an official declaration that a certain style is "out" and women with that style need to immediately visit a stylist. Some women learn of the change more quickly than others, some never learn, and those who do change sometimes go in the wrong direction, and adopt a style that is less rather than more fashionable. All of this is characteristic of an informal norm.

Norms, then, perform a regulatory and often a survival function. For these reasons alone they are influential. Despite these definite values, however, group members will often be tempted to violate a norm in order to maximize their own gain. Such deviance could potentially harm the group, so to guard against it occurring, most groups will have developed a sanctioning system designed to punish non-normative behavior. The familiar example is the system of punishments most societies create for lawbreakers (e.g., the fine associated with exceeding the speed limit), but punishments can be intangible as well. Ostracism, or the social shunning of group members, is a common, and often effective, means of keeping deviants in line. Sanctioning systems, however, are largely ineffective if they are inconsistently applied, because this implies that punishment is probabilistic rather than deterministic (e.g., speeders are sometimes but not always fined); if the sanction itself is weak and has no real negative impact (the fine for speeding is only 25 cents); or if continued group membership is not especially attractive to the deviant (the speeder who loses his driver's license is willing to ride public transportation). Interestingly, evidence suggests that groups can be distinguished by the breadth of their sanctioning systems. In some groups any deviation from any norm will result in swift and sure retribution, while in other groups some deviance will be tolerated, as long at it is not too severe, and does not involve a crucial norm.

⊕

Group Norms and Group Boundaries

Group norms both create unity within the group and create boundaries between groups. The following text describes how group norms among the Santals, a non-Hindu ethnic group in India, help differentiate Santals from Hindus and how adherence to Santal norms gains one acceptance in the group.

When distinguishing themselves from Hindus, Santals make use of some relative criteria. These are bonga (nature spirits), handi (rice-beer), and khasi (pork). These are, incidentally, also the practices for which the Santals are despised by the Hindus.

As pointed out above, belief in bongas and witchcraft is deeply rooted in their lifeways, so much so that "bonga" is a password for Santal. We have noted above that non-tribal Santal call their tribal brothers as bonga-hor. Similarly, handi (rice-beer) has very important place in Santal life. In rituals, social gatherings, festivals, informal visits, ceremonies, meetings, in fact at every important occasion, rice-beer is necessarily passed. It is a form of social obligation. It is a sacred libation to bongas. It is a "fine" imposed by the village council. Handi and dancing, for the Santal, is a symbol of happy, prosperous, ideal life. Characterizing the Hinduized Santals once K. Hemrom of Kuapara said, "Are they Santals? They do not even drink. How can they be Santal?" Not drinking rice-beer is associated with Hindu norms in contradistinction to the Santal norms. I myself had great difficulty in establishing rapport with them, until I started accepting rice-beer from them. This, I later learnt, was the greatest qualification of friendship they ascribed to me. "He sits and drinks with us", they would very proudly inform their visitors, and I was soon given cordial smile even by the Santals I never knew. Khasi (pork) is similarly another quality which they think distinguishes them from Hindus, although pork does not have such important place in their life as handi. Zeal for handi, dancing and pork is shared by the detribalised Santals also.

Source: Kochar, Vijay. (1970). *Social Organization Among the Santal.* Calcutta: Editions Indian, pp. 35–36.

The particular problem for the group leader is the situation in which a small-group norm conflicts with the larger-scale norm. For example, there is evidence that many blue-collar workers perceive safety gear (goggles, helmets, steel-toed shoes, ear plugs, safety guards) as not "macho," and as such an informal norm can develop to not employ these devices. This is at odds with the company's norm of accident prevention, and sets the stage for serious problems.

that they indicate to members what is and is not appropriate. Consequently, it is especially important that norms be accurately transmitted to incoming members of the group. The process of norm transmission is typically referred to as "socialization." Formal norms, because they are recorded, are relatively easy to transmit, though someone must take the time to provide the documentation to the new member and clarify any ambiguities that exist in the written record. Rather than engaging in rigorous education, groups will sometimes ask an experienced member to explain the formal norms. This method, however, can be problematic, in part because it assumes that the experienced member correctly understands the formal norm, and in part because the member may convey some bad habits designed to partially circumvent the norm, or behavioral shortcuts that only work for experienced individuals. Because of these, it is generally recommended that group leaders take the time to explain explicitly formal norms to new members. This is best accomplished by conducting a new member orientation.

Informal norms tend to be shared verbally or by means of new members observing the behaviors of experienced members. Knowledge of the informal norms is typically confined to members of an ingroup and it can be very difficult for an outgroup member to receive acknowledgement that the norm exists. Thus, if the outgroup member desires to change the informal norm, he/she often has to act on simple perceptions that the norm exists.

NORM TRANSMISSION

What should be evident from the preceding discussion is that norms serve an informational function, in

CHANGING NORMS

Once established, norms retain their influence for a substantial period of time. In a famous study in the

early 1960s, R. C. Jacobs and Donald Campbell created a laboratory group that would perform a visual perception task. They instilled in the group a norm to falsely report the experience of the visual stimulus. The task was repeated many times, and on each repetition a member of the group was replaced by a new member until all of the original members were gone. The experimenters then commenced replacing this second generation of members with a third generation, and so on for many generations. Jacobs and Campbell observed the original "false report" norm to be influential across many generations, though each succeeding generation altered it slightly, and eventually the norm matched that observed in a control group. The key idea here, though, is that no generation simply created a new norm as its own; rather, it adopted the one employed by the previous generation, sometimes in a modified version. And it is important to remember that the perpetuated norm was a deviant one. This demonstrates that norms are durable.

But what do we do if we want to alter a norm? Certainly a deviant norm needs to be changed, but there are also situations in which once-acceptable norms are now outdated and need to be changed. Examples of the latter are seen in once-thriving companies that failed to change their business practices with the times. How can we effect such change if norms persist as strongly as they seem to?

The Jacobs and Campbell study suggests one possible method—rotation of group membership. In this way, members whose behavior is entrenched in the unattractive norm are removed, and new members who can be trained in the desirable norm are added. However, often it is impractical, or even impossible, to remove established members, and, even if membership changes can be executed, there may well be significant performance drawbacks associated with the exchange of experienced members for novice ones. A compromise is to identify the member who most strongly enforces the norm and remove him/her. Other strategies that have been suggested are demonstration of the fallibility of the norm; providing incentives for adherence to the new norm; and punishing those who follow the old norm. No one of these techniques; however, seems

to be uniformly successful. In fact, the most successful "intervention" for altering a norm seems to be the group's experiencing a failure as the result of adhering to the established norm, because this "failure" provides evidence that the norm simply does not work anymore. For example, though company insiders had been trying for a decade to change it, General Motors' pattern of avoiding issues of fuel efficiency was finally altered in the late 1970s after sales of General Motors' cars was surpassed by sales of fuel-efficient imports. (Automotive historians generally treat 1980, when the company initiated a $40 billion redesign program, created the vice president for quality and reliability position, and suffered its first financial loss in 60 years, as the turning point.) Note, however, that experienced failure does not necessarily indicate how the norm should be changed. Groups that desire change will often need to solicit outside information to assist with development of the new norm.

Implicit in this discussion is the value of flexible norms, or norms from which some deviation will be tolerated. There is some evidence that norm flexibility reduces the likelihood that subgroups will adopt their own standards of behavior. Also, as the original norm becomes less applicable, its flexibility will allow it to be altered more easily, thus helping the group avoid the more radical changes that occur if a prevailing norm has to be abandoned and replaced by a completely new standard.

IMPLICATIONS

No group can easily exist without a set of norms. Group leaders, however, need to remember that the norms within a smaller group do not have to correspond to the norms of the larger group within which it is embedded. Simply assuming that members of the smaller group will act in a particular way because the larger group subscribes to that behavior is dangerous. The leader needs also to be aware that the efficacy of norms can change over time. What has worked historically may no longer be what is needed now. For these reasons, overseeing an effective and productive group requires monitoring the prevailing group norms, and intervening when, for

whatever reason, the norm is contributing to suboptimal performance.

—Craig D. Parks

Further Reading

Abrams, D., Marques, J. M., Bown, N., & Henson, M. (2000). Pro-norm and anti-norm deviance within and between groups. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 78,* 906–912.

Baron, R. S., Kerr, N. L., & Miller, N. (1992). *Group process, group decision, group action.* Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Berkos, K. M., Allen, T. H., Kearney, P., & Plax, T. G. (2001). When norms are violated: Imagined interactions as processing and coping mechanisms. *Communication Monographs, 68,* 289–300.

Gammage, K. L., Carron, A. V., & Estabrooks, P. A. (2001). Team cohesion and individual productivity: The influence of the norm for productivity and the identifiability of individual effort. *Small Group Research, 32,* 3–18.

Horne, C. (2001). The enforcement of norms: Group cohesion and meta-norms. *Social Psychology Quarterly, 64,* 253–266.

Jacobs, R. C., & Campbell, D. T. (1961). The perpetuation of an arbitrary tradition through several generations of a laboratory microculture. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, 62,* 649–658.

Marques, J. M., Abrams, D., & Serodio, R. G. (2001). Being better by being right: Subjective group dynamics and derogation of in-group deviants when generic norms are undermined. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 81,* 436–447.

Opp, K. D. (2002). When do norms emerge by human design and when by the unintended consequences of human action? The example of the no-smoking norm. *Rationality and Society, 14,* 131–158.

Sani, F., & Todman, J. (2002). Should we stay or should we go? A social psychological model of schisms in groups. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 28,* 1647–1655.