

The Dynamics of Norm Formation and Norm Decay

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Extended Abstract: Social norms are a ubiquitous feature of social life and appear to pervade almost every aspect of human social interaction. They are *commonly known standards of behavior* that are based on *widely shared views* of how individual group members *ought* to behave. However, despite their omnipresence fundamental questions related to social norms lack convincing answers: How and when do normative standards of behavior emerge? How are they maintained and when do they decay? Do social norms activate intrinsic motivations to comply with them and are these motivations sufficient to ensure compliance? Do norms exert an independent causal effect on behavior or are they simply an epiphenomenon of the web of prevailing incentives and institutions? Do norm violations undermine or change the normative standard and the extent to which it is widely shared? Do normative standards also affect their own enforcement? Do they affect the behavioral responses to norm enforcement behaviors?

Progress in answering these questions has been severely retarded by a lack of directly observable “high-frequency” measures of normative behavioral standards that assume the properties of social norms. Here, we develop and validate such a measure in the context of an experimental collective action problem and show how it helps to answer the above mentioned questions. We show, in particular, that widely shared normative standards do trigger compliance motives and increase participation in normatively required collective action. However, the strength and nature of the compliance motives are insufficient to ensure maintenance of social norms. In fact, in the absence of explicit opportunities for sanctioning norm violators, norms eventually lose any behavioral drawing power: initial norm violations are not sanctioned and are associated with (i) further increases in norm violations, (ii) a steady decay in the normative standard and (iii) a break-down of the normative consensus.

The provision of voluntary sanctioning opportunities, however, not only blocks all three above mentioned processes but causes even an increase in the normative consensus and leads to the stable maintenance of a social norm. Finally, we vary the opportunity for the formation of social norms exogenously and document that – when peer sanctioning is possible – social norms exert a causal impact by *increasing* the overall participation in collective action while simultaneously *reducing* the sanctioning of those who don’t participate. In other words, social norms render the establishment and enforcement of collective action more efficient.