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Norms and Mores

by Sophia

In this lesson, you will learn how social norms develop, and how they are enforced or not enforced in society. You will also learn about "breaching experiments" when people intentionally violate these norms. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Formal Norms

The examples in this unit so far have often described how people are expected to behave in certain situations—for example, when buying food or boarding a train. These examples describe the visible and invisible rules of conduct through which societies are structured, or what sociologists call norms. **Norms** define how to behave in accordance with what society has defined as good, right, and important, and most members of society adhere to them.

Formal norms are established written rules. They are behaviors worked out and agreed upon in order to suit and serve the people who established them, which sometimes means the majority of the population and sometimes means a powerful elite. Laws are formal norms, but so are employee manuals, college entrance exam requirements, and "no running" signs at swimming pools. Formal norms are the most specific and clearly stated of the various types of norms, and they are the most strictly enforced. But even formal norms are enforced to varying degrees and are reflective of cultural values.

> ↗ EXAMPLE Money is highly valued in the United States, so monetary crimes are punished. It's against the law to rob a bank, and banks go to great lengths to prevent such crimes. People safeguard valuable possessions and install anti-theft devices to protect homes and cars.

A less strictly enforced social norm in the United States is the norm against interpersonal violence. While it's against the law to attack and assault someone, there are few systems in place to prevent such violence. The law will prosecute violent people after the fact, and police may intervene once a violent attack has begun, but the law also guarantees access to guns and other weapons, which may be used for violence. These examples show a range of enforcement of formal norms.

> 🗎 TERMS TO KNOW
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> **Norms**
>   Visible and invisible rules of conduct that define how to behave in accordance with what a society has defined as good, right, and important.
>
> **Formal Norms**
>   Established, written rules.

2. Informal Norms

There are plenty of formal norms, but the list of **informal norms**—casual behaviors that are generally and widely conformed to—is longer. People learn informal norms through observation, imitation, and general socialization. Most people don't commit even benign breaches of informal norms—can you imagine walking up to a stranger on the street and handing them a flower? Most people would assume that you were selling something, or part of some kind of street performance, because there is such a strong social norm against randomly distributing items to passersby, even with nice intent.

Informal norms dictate appropriate behaviors without the need for written rules. Some informal norms are taught directly in childhood—"Share your toys with your sister," or "Use your napkin,"—while others are learned by observation, including observations of the consequences when someone else violates a norm. Informal norms can be challenging to navigate when differences appear because we sometimes can't articulate the informal norm that is dictating our behavior. One example might be if your family had a norm of talking about interpersonal problems openly, while your roommate's family had a norm of avoiding open conflict—what happens when you and your roommate have an interpersonal problem?

Another challenge with informal norms is that some people find it easier than others to unconsciously identify and adopt group norms. Many people with autism spectrum disorders find it frustrating that neurotypical people expect them to just know what to do without explicit communication. Informal norms can be found among many types of groups of people, from friend groups to workplaces to entire communities, and navigating conflicts and misunderstandings from differing informal norms is a crucial part of welcoming new people and thriving in new settings.

In addition to norms being formal and informal, there are also what are called prescriptive norms and proscriptive norms. **Prescriptive norms** are norms that tell you what you should do. They prescribe what you should do in social interaction.

> ↗ EXAMPLE A prescriptive norm tells you that you should listen while other people are speaking, and a prescriptive norm tells you to say please and thank you.

Proscriptive norms, on the other hand, prescribe what an individual is not to do, what should be avoided.

> ↗ EXAMPLE A proscriptive norm may tell you that you should not interrupt other people and that you should not grab things from other people while they are using them.

> 🗎 TERMS TO KNOW
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> **Informal Norms**
>   Casual behaviors that are generally and widely conformed to, but without being explicitly instructed.
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> **Prescriptive Norms**
>   Norms that tell people what they should do.
>
> **Proscriptive Norms**
>   Norms that tell people what they should not do.

3. Breaching Experiments

There are many rules about interacting with strangers in public. It's acceptable to tell a man you like his shoes. It's not acceptable to ask if you can try them on. It's acceptable to stand in line behind someone at the grocery check-out. It's not acceptable to take items from their cart. It's acceptable to sit beside someone on a crowded bus. It's considered odd to sit beside a stranger on a mostly-empty bus. What happens when people behave unpredictably or violate informal norms?

You might be tempted to go test some norms on your next bus ride, just to see what happens. The sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1917–2011)

ran experiments that did just that. He studied people's customs in order to find out how societal rules and norms not only influenced behavior but also shaped social order. He believed that One of Garfinkel's research methods was known as a **breaching experiment**, in which the researcher behaves in an unexpected manner in order to test the sociological concepts of social norms and conformity. The participants are not aware an experiment is in progress. If the breach is successful, however, these "innocent bystanders" will respond in some way. For example, if the experimenter is, say, a man in a business suit, and he skips down the sidewalk or hops on one foot, the passersby are likely to stare at him with surprised expressions on their faces. But the experimenter does not simply "act weird" in public. Rather, the point is to deviate from a specific social norm in a small way, to subtly break some form of social etiquette, and see what happens.

To conduct his ethnomethodology, Garfinkel deliberately imposed strange behaviors on unknowing people. Then he observed their responses. He suspected that odd behaviors would shatter conventional expectations, but he wasn't sure how. For some breaching experiments, the researcher directly engaged with innocent bystanders. An experimenter might strike up a conversation in a public bathroom, where it's common to respect each other's privacy so fiercely as to ignore other people's presence. In a grocery store, an experimenter might take a food item out of another person's grocery cart, saying, "That looks good! I think I'll try it." An experimenter might sit down at a table with others in a fast-food restaurant or follow someone around a museum and study the same paintings. In those cases, the bystanders are pressured to respond, and their discomfort illustrates how much we depend on social norms.

> ⭐ BIG IDEA
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> Breaching experiments uncover and explore the many unwritten social rules we live by.

> 📄 TERM TO KNOW
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> **Breaching Experiment**
> A research method developed by Harold Garfinkel, in which the researcher behaves in a socially unexpected way in order to test the sociological concepts of norms and conformity.

4. Mores and Folkways

Norms may be further classified as either mores or folkways. **Mores** (mor-ays) are norms that embody the moral views and principles of a group. Violating them can have serious consequences. The strongest mores are legally protected with laws or other formal norms. In the United States, for instance, murder is both considered immoral and is punishable by law (a formal norm). But more often, mores are judged and guarded by public sentiment (an informal norm). People who violate mores are seen as shameful. They can even be shunned or banned from some groups.

> ↗ EXAMPLE The mores of the U.S. school system require that a student's writing be in the student's own words or use special forms (such as quotation marks and a whole system of citation) for crediting other writers. Writing another person's words as if they are one's own is considered a form of stealing and it even has a specific name: plagiarism. The consequences of violating this norm are severe and may result in expulsion.

Unlike mores, **folkways** are norms without any moral underpinnings. Rather, folkways direct appropriate behavior in the day-to-day practices and expressions of culture. They indicate whether to shake hands or kiss on the cheek when greeting another person. They specify whether to wear a tie and blazer or a T-shirt and sandals to an event.

> ↗ EXAMPLE In regions in the southern United States, bumping into an acquaintance means stopping to chat. It's considered rude not to, no matter how busy one is. In many cities in the northern United States, people guard their privacy and value efficiency, so a simple nod of the head is enough.

Other accepted folkways in the United States may include holding the door open for a stranger or giving someone a gift on their birthday. The rules regarding these folkways may change from culture to culture.

Many folkways are actions we take for granted. People need to act without thinking in order to get seamlessly through daily routines; they can't stop and analyze every action. Those who experience culture shock may find that it subsides as they learn the new culture's folkways and are able to move through their daily routines more smoothly. Folkways might be small manners, learned by observation and imitation, but they are by no means trivial. Like mores and laws, these norms help people negotiate their daily lives within a given culture.

> ⭐ BIG IDEA
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> It is important to study norms, mores, and folkways because they are the cultural foundation of society. They're the rules that enable us to live together in groups and form relatively stable societies that can last over time and not come apart, because we all know how to behave together. We need mores and norms to co-exist in a society.

> ▶ 🤝 **Relationship Building: Skill Tip**
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> Consider your career goal. How might norms and rituals affect your professional relationships? What are some norms and rituals that you have experienced in other educational or professional situations, and how did they affect your ability to build relationships?

> ⏺ WATCH
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> What does it mean to violate a norm or more? In the following video, you will be introduced to the concept of deviance, which we will study in greater detail later in this course You will begin to see what happens when people don't follow the stated or unstated rules of society that we have discussed in this tutorial.

> 📄 TERMS TO KNOW
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> **Mores**
> Norms that embody the moral views and principles of a group.
>
> **Folkways**
> Norms without any moral underpinnings.

SUMMARY

In this lesson, you explored the different types of norms that govern behavior within a culture. These can be **formal norms** or **informal norms**, which is indicated by how the norm is enforced, and they can be **mores or folkways**, which is indicated by whether the norm is associated with values.**Breaching experiments** help sociologists to understand norms, and understanding norms is crucial for navigating daily life.

Best of luck in your learning!

REFERENCES

Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology.* Prentice-Hall.

TERMS TO KNOW

Breaching Experiment
A research method developed by Harold Garfinkel, in which the researcher behaves in a socially unexpected way in order to test the sociological concepts of norms and conformity.

Folkways
Norms without any moral underpinnings.

Formal Norms
Established, written rules.

Informal Norms
Casual behaviors that are generally and widely conformed to, but without being explicitly instructed.

Mores
Norms that embody the moral views and principles of a group.

Norms
Visible and invisible rules of conduct that define how to behave in accordance with what a society has defined as good, right, and important.

Prescriptive Norms
Norms that tell people what they should do.

Proscriptive Norms
Norms that tell people what they should not do.