

3.3: Norms among Group Members

Learning Objectives

1. Identify positive sentiments, as well as challenges, associated with group norms
2. Discuss ways in which group norms may be enforced
3. Identify processes for challenging and changing group norms

Knotty Norms

Before we had our daughter, my husband and I used to just take a couple of moments before dinner and hold hands, just to bring us to a still quiet place, before beginning the evening meal. So, when he had our little girl, really from the time she could sit in the high chair, we held hands together, just for a few moments of silence, and then we squeezed hands and released.

Well, we did this day in, day out, year in, year out, and then when she was old enough to count--I don't know how old she was--but one evening we squeezed hands and she looked up and smiled and said, "I got to 35."

And her dad and I both looked at her and said, "What?"

And she said, "I got to 35." She said, "Usually I only get to 20 or 25."

And simultaneously, my husband and I said, "You count?"

And she looked at us and said, "Well, what do you do?"

And here all these years, where we thought this was just this little almost a spiritual moment, we never explained to her what that was about or what we were doing, and she thought we were all counting.

A *New Yorker* cartoon shows a couple that's apparently just left a large room filled with people partying. The woman is reaching to press the button of an elevator, while the man holds a tripod, a long pointer, and several large charts and graphs under his arm. The woman says, "Frankly, Benjamin, you're beginning to bore everyone with your statistics."

It's important to identify a group's norms if we're to have a good shot at predicting what it will do under different circumstances. In the comments above, the mother whose daughter used the quiet time before dinner to count in her head thought her family's mealtime norms were clear to all its members, but she was mistaken.

Do members of a group understand its norms, then? And if they understand them, do they accept and follow them? When and how do they change them? The answers to these questions play a large role in determining the effectiveness of the members and of the group as a whole.

Responding to Norms

What does it mean to you if you say something is "normal"? Probably it means that you feel it's usual and right—correct? Part of your reaction to something you consider "normal," therefore, is likely to be a sense of comfort and assurance. Furthermore, you wouldn't want to intentionally engage in or be around someone who engages in behavior that you don't consider to be normal. The term for such behavior is, after all, "abnormal."

Shortly we'll examine how groups enforce their norms, what happens when people violate them, and how we can best try to change them. Let's recognize first, however, that considering something "normal" or "the norm" in the first place can lead to challenges. As we'll be reminded later when we discuss conflict in groups, one such challenge arises from the fact that people's opinions—about everything—differ.

In a large organization where one of the authors worked, a male colleague told a joke while he and some other employees waited for a staff meeting to start. In the joke, a man who thought he had cleverly avoided being assaulted found that he had been outsmarted and was going to be executed instead. The people who heard the joke laughed, work-related topics came up, and the staff meeting commenced.

Sometimes differences of opinion in groups deal with inconsequential topics or norms and therefore cause no difficulty for anyone. Who cares, for instance, whether people bring coffee with them to morning meetings or not, or whether they wear bright-colored articles of clothing?

Up to a certain point, furthermore, we all tend to accommodate differences between ourselves and others on a daily basis without giving it a second thought. We may even pride ourselves on our tolerance when we accept those differences.

On the other hand, we know that things which are customary aren't always right. Slavery was once considered normal throughout the world, for instance, and so was child labor. Obviously, we may find it challenging to confront norms that differ significantly from our personal beliefs and values.

Enforcing Norms

Whether a group enforces a norm, and if so in what way, depends on several factors. These factors may include the level of formality of the group, the importance the group attaches to a particular norm, and the degree and frequency with which the norm is violated.

If a norm is of minor importance, and especially if it's implicit, violating it may not provoke much of a response. Perhaps someone will just frown, shake a finger at the "violatee," or otherwise convey displeasure without using words. (Think about a time when someone's cell phone went off in a large crowd at a speech or professional conference, for example).

On the other hand, explicit norms are often accompanied by explicit efforts to enforce them. A group may make it clear, either orally or in writing, what will happen if someone violates such a norm. The syllabus produced by one university professor we know, for instance, stipulated that anyone whose cell phone rings during a lesson must either write a 500-word essay or bring donuts to everyone else in class the next time they met.

Policy manuals and rule books comprise formal, clear expressions of norms both in and outside academe. So do city ordinances, state and federal laws, and IRS regulations. These manifestations of norms include statements of what consequences will be associated with violating them.

On the level of a small group, a team of college students preparing for a class presentation might decide to have its members sign an agreement indicating their willingness to meet at certain predetermined times or to contact each other regularly by phone or text messages. The agreement might also indicate that the group will report a teammate to their instructor if that person fails to observe its terms.

The example we've just considered involves a form of punishment, which can be one consequence of violating a norm. What else can happen if you violate a group norm? Galanes and Adams (Galanes, G., & Adams, K. (2013). *Effective group discussion: Theory and practice*. New York: McGraw-Hill) identify these consequences:

- Loss of influence
- Ostracism
- Exclusion

Particularly within large organizations, groups can benefit from contemplating early in their "life cycle" just how they would expect to respond to various kinds of behavior that violate their norms. They may decide that punishment will be part of the picture for serious violations. If so, they should probably reflect on how members might rejoin the group or regain their stature within it after a punishment has been administered and an offense has been corrected.

Challenging and Changing Group Norms

Think back to the story about our colleague at the staff meeting. Evidently, he thought that the norms of the organization permitted him to tell his joke. When his fellow employees laughed, he probably also assumed that they found the joke to be amusing.

After the meeting, however, as four or five people lingered in the room, one of the female staffers spoke. "It's really hard for me to say this," she said, "but I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't tell jokes about execution."

The woman who expressed herself to the group made clear that she felt its norms needed to be changed if jokes about execution were considered acceptable. The woman was right in two respects. First, execution is no laughing matter, and a group norm that condones jokes about it ought to be rejected. Second, when she told her colleagues "It's really hard for me to say this," she illustrated that it's difficult to confront other people to propose that they change the norms they operate under.

In this case, one group member submitted a polite request to her fellow group members. As it turned out, those members accepted her request. The man who told the joke apologized, and to our knowledge, no more jokes about execution were told in the group.

Things aren't always this straightforward, though. Therefore, adopting a systematic approach may prepare you for the wide-ranging situations in which you or your fellow group members want to change your norms. What principles and behaviors, then, should you

follow if you feel a group norm is ineffective, inappropriate, or wrong?

Lamberton and Minor-Evans (Lamberton, L., & Minor-Evans, L. (2002). *Human relations: Strategies for success* (2nd ed.). New York: Glencoe McGraw-Hill). recommend that you follow these steps:

1. Confirm whether everyone in the group agrees on the purpose of the group. Different norms will arise from different assumptions about the group's purpose and will fit the different assumptions on which they are based. Misunderstandings or disagreements about the purpose of the group need to be identified and worked through.
2. See if other people's understanding of the group's current norms is the same as yours. Again, it's important to know whether other members of the group agree on what norms the group actually has.

Remember the examples at the beginning of this section, in which a small daughter thought that holding hands before dinner was a time for silent counting and a man thought it was okay to bring charts and graphs to a social occasion? They illustrate that it's possible to completely misconstrue a group norm even in close, ongoing relationships and at any age.

1. Explain to the group why you feel a particular norm ought to be changed.
2. Offer a plan for changing the norm, including a replacement for it which you feel will be better, drawing upon the full potential of each member.
3. If necessary, change the composition and role assignments of the group.

Key Takeaway

Once they have been established, group norms are generally enforced in some way but can also be challenged and modified.

Exercise 3.3.1

1. Identify two norms, one explicit and one implicit, that you've encountered in a group setting. Did you observe the norms being enforced in some way? If so, what kind of enforcement was employed, and by whom?
2. Describe a time when you were part of a group and believed that one of its norms needed to be changed. What made you feel that way? Was your view shared by anyone else in the group?
3. What steps have you taken to challenge a group norm? How did the other members of the group respond to your challenge? If you had a chance to go back and relive the situation, what if anything would you change about your actions? (If you don't recall ever having challenged a group norm, describe a situation in which someone else did so).

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