

## 1 The Problem

**F**OR CENTURIES, WOMEN IN CHINA PRACTICED FOOTBINDING. Footbinding involved folding the foot of a young girl under itself and wrapping it tightly with bandages. The result was that the foot grew to be no more than a few inches long. Women with bound feet were unable to walk normally. They experienced pain and complications, including gangrene, amputation, and even death. Despite these damaging effects, women perpetuated the practice, making sure that their daughters' feet were bound. Footbinding was almost universal among the Chinese and persisted for hundreds of years. Numerous reform efforts failed. Laws against footbinding did nothing to discourage it. Efforts by Western missionaries to inform the Chinese of world opinion about the practice had no effect. But then—in one of the greatest social transformations of the twentieth century—footbinding disappeared in a single generation (Mackie 1996, 2006). Why, given its painful and damaging effects and the efforts to stop it, was the practice of footbinding so widespread and so prolonged? And how, after all the failed efforts, was it finally eliminated?

Modern Western societies typically try to solve social problems using one of three tools: government, with its power to penalize problematic

behavior; market incentives, with their ability to motivate productive activity; and education and the internalization of appropriate values. None of these approaches, however, accounts for the demise of footbinding. Laws failed to stop the practice. There is no evidence that markets affected it. And education efforts had little impact. None of the strategies upon which modern societies typically rely explains the persistence and demise of footbinding.

What does? In the late 1800s, British romance novelist Mrs. Archibald Little moved with her new husband to China. More than other British wives, she sought to understand the people around her (Croll 1990; Little 1899). Little became very concerned about the practice of footbinding. She traveled through China studying the practice and the attempts to end it. At one point in her travels, she came across a small community in which the residents had pledged not to bind their daughters' feet and had promised that their sons would marry natural-footed women. Consistent with that pledge, the residents did not practice footbinding. Little recognized the significance of what the community had accomplished. Its example stimulated the creation of Anti-Footbinding Societies in which members made the same promise (Mackie 2006). These societies led to the end of footbinding. They worked because they greatly reduced the negative social consequences of unbound feet. Those earlier social pressures had been strong. Girls whose feet were not bound risked remaining single. But once Anti-Footbinding Societies existed, mothers no longer needed to fear for the futures of daughters with unbound feet. Norms mandating footbinding dissolved. The practice disappeared.

This success story points to a potential source of solutions for intractable social challenges. The failure of governments and markets to solve a number of serious contemporary problems highlights a need for additional tools. Mrs. Little stumbled across a solution implemented by Chinese villagers—a solution that recognized the power of social norms. Norms may also be useful for addressing problems here and now. However, to proactively take advantage of them, we must understand them.

A challenge for anyone trying to understand norms is to determine exactly what they are. Whereas the concept is one of the most widely

used in the social sciences, there is little consensus about what norms are and how they emerge. Scholars disagree about the essential elements that constitute a norm. To complicate matters, a variety of other concepts—custom, role, institution, law, value, moral, behavioral regularity, and so forth—are similar to or overlap in significant ways with norms.

I rely on a definition that incorporates elements that many (though not all) scholars view as essential. I define norms as rules, about which there is some degree of consensus, that are socially enforced. Norms may have an internal component. That is, they may define individuals' values and worldviews. They may also be related to patterns of behavior. But while they may overlap with internalized values and behavioral regularities, those features are not unique to norms. Instead, I take the position that social sanctions distinguish norms from other related concepts. Sanctions are an essential element of norms. This does not mean that sanctions are the only things that need an explanation if we want to understand norms, but they are an essential thing to explain. If we cannot explain norm enforcement, then we will not understand norms.

In this book, therefore, I focus on explaining social sanctions. Even narrowing the problem to enforcement (rather than norms in their totality) leaves a range of complicated issues. I do not claim to address them all. Rather, I isolate a small number of key causal factors and mechanisms that are not well understood. Specifically, I link a characteristic of social relations (the interdependence of individuals) to sanctioning. The resulting relational theory of norm enforcement sheds light on a number of theoretical puzzles:

- If a behavior is wrong or harmful, why is it sometimes punished and sometimes not?
- Why do people enforce norms that benefit others rather than themselves?
- Why do we see groups enforce norms far more than makes sense—so much so that they actually harm the group?

- Why do people punish nonconsequential behavior—behavior that has only trivial, if any, effects?
- Why do people sometimes sanction atypical behavior and at other times do nothing?

### Theoretical Perspectives on Norms

My approach to understanding norm enforcement builds on and complements existing research. Dominant approaches to thinking about norms focus on the characteristics of the normative act. Each emphasizes a different feature of behavior as important—its consequences for community members, the meaning attached to it, or its frequency. These approaches vary in the extent to which they explicitly address the enforcement problem, and none provides a complete explanation. Nonetheless, each suggests insights that have implications for understanding sanctioning.

#### *The Consequentialist Approach*

Behavior consequences approaches hold that norms emerge in response to problematic actions. Early functionalist explanations tended simply to assume the emergence of welfare-enhancing norms. More recent interest-based approaches seek to explain how instrumental individuals manage to produce them.

The standard instrumental argument is that when an individual does something, his behavior does not necessarily affect only him. It may also affect the people around him. Those behavior consequences create a demand for norms (Coleman 1990; see also Demsetz 1967). People who are affected by the behavior would like it to be controlled; they have an interest in regulating it (Heckathorn 1988, 1989). That interest leads them to react negatively to harmful behavior or positively to cooperative actions. Everyone benefits from such sanctioning.

Antismoking norms provide evidence of this dynamic (Ellickson 2001). Americans used to think that smoking was acceptable, even cool. Famed CBS news anchor Edward R. Murrow was shown smoking during his broadcasts. Movie stars smoked on screen. But, eventually, people

began hearing about studies showing that secondhand smoke caused lung damage. Smoking was not just the smoker's business anymore. People began reacting negatively to it. Now we hear much more criticism than defense of smoking—because we recognize the dangers.

Smoking is a specific behavior that hurts bystanders. A more general category of behavior that affects others is free-riding. Free-riding occurs in social dilemma situations—those in which the interests of individuals are at odds with those of the group. Such dilemmas are common in social life. For example, any individual might prefer not to make the effort to go to the polls on a cold, rainy night, but if everyone stays home to eat dinner, voter turnout is low and democracy is diminished. Norms researchers identify such social dilemmas in the field, or design studies that create them, and then observe the norms that emerge. They find that, as expected, people punish free-riders (see, for example, Fehr and Gächter 2002; Yamagishi 1986, 1988). Individual pursuit of self-interest in social dilemma situations is theoretically analogous to many specific, concrete behaviors.<sup>1</sup> Just as people react negatively to free-riding and smoking, they will react to other behaviors that have consequences for them.

This argument suggests that as the consequences of a behavior become larger, people's interest in regulating it becomes stronger. They will be more concerned about stopping murder than minor theft. They will be more worried about teenagers getting drunk and driving than about moderate social drinking around the dinner table. We would, therefore, expect stronger punishments to be directed against more damaging behavior (Yamagishi 1988). The benefits of punishing deviance (including the cessation of the harmful act) motivate people to sanction. The larger those potential benefits are relative to the costs, the more sanctioning occurs (Ostrom 1990).

There is a caveat to this argument, however. Rational individuals would presumably prefer to benefit from reductions in harmful behavior without having to make the effort to sanction themselves. They would prefer to avoid the costs—possible retaliation, time, energy, and so forth. They are tempted to free-ride on others' sanctioning efforts. They hope that someone else will ask the smoker at the next table to

stop. They hope that someone else will confront the person who cut into line. They hope that someone else will do something about the sugary snacks handed out at their child's day-care center. Because norm enforcement is costly to the individual, but provides benefits to many, it is problematic.

To explain why people punish despite the temptation to do nothing, some researchers have turned to psychological traits. They have found evidence that many people have an innate tendency to react negatively to free-riding (Fehr and Gintis 2007; Gintis et al. 2005). Laboratory experiments have shown that people get angry. Their anger can motivate them to punish despite the costs (Fehr and Gächter 2002). Further, people actually feel good when they punish (Knutson 2004).

Psychological traits differ across individuals and can produce variation in sanctioning. For example, people who do not trust others will support sanctioning systems more than those who do (Yamagishi 1986). Some individuals are more inclined to cooperate than others—cooperating if they expect that others will reciprocate and sanctioning antisocial behavior (Fehr and Gintis 2007).<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the psychological trait of interest in a particular study, in general, approaches that focus on the consequences of behavior suggest that the damaging nature of an action triggers reactions to it.<sup>3</sup> The implication of this view is that norms encourage individuals to cooperate rather than pursue their own self-interest at the expense of the group.<sup>4</sup> Norms enhance group welfare.

But such a view is inconsistent with reality. Norms do not always benefit the group. Sometimes they regulate behaviors that appear to have no consequences at all (fashion in men's ties, for example, or the color of their belts and shoes). And sometimes norms mandate harmful behavior rather than discourage it, as in the case of footbinding.

### *The Meanings Approach*

In part for this reason, many argue that a focus on the consequences of behavior alone is inadequate. One must also examine the meaning of a behavior (see, for example, Fine 2001). These scholars point to instances

in which actors do things that make no sense if we consider only the objective outcomes—situations in which consequences alone do not fully explain behavior. Footbinding is only one such destructive practice. Norms of revenge (Elster 1990), rate-busting by workers (Elster 1989), and downward-leveling norms in some ethnic and socioeconomic groups (Portes 1998; Willis 1981) are other examples. It is not only individuals who appear to ignore outcomes—businesses and governments do as well. Countries, for example, may create educational systems that are out of sync with the work lives of their citizens, requiring agricultural workers to study fractions or rural villagers to learn about chemical reactions (Meyer et al. 1997; Meyer, Ramirez, and Soysal 1992).

Pointing to such examples, meanings scholars argue that our explanations will be improved if we consider not only a “logic of consequences” but also a “logic of appropriateness” (March and Olsen 1998; Risse 2000). In addition to (or instead of) weighing the possible costs and benefits of an action, people consider whether it is the right thing to do. Shared meanings become part of how they see the world and, in turn, affect their behavior. On this view, Chinese mothers had their daughters’ feet bound because they felt that such behavior was appropriate. Footbinding was taken for granted; it was something that good Chinese families did. Once the practice was established, people had a hard time imagining anything different.

***The Creation of Shared Meaning*** Scholars seek to explain how these shared meanings emerge. They argue that human beings are active participants in creating their world (Berger and Luckmann 1967). People interact and negotiate to produce views of behavior. They may rely on understandings drawn from previous experience (Dobbin 1994; Rydgren 2007). They may engage in discussions in which they try to determine the “right thing” (Risse 2000). They may negotiate conflicts of interest (Fine 2001) and conflicts over meaning (Graham 2003). They may try to justify choices in a world of conflicting norms (Fine 2001).

Many scholars pay attention to these interaction and negotiation processes. Research suggests that children learn the meaning of friendship

in the course of interacting with playmates (Davies 1982; Rizzo 1989, 105), and adolescents develop interpretations of events and establish routines unique to their group (Everhart 1983; Fine 1987; Willis 1981). Researchers interested in social movements describe framing processes and the negotiation of common identities (Cohen 1985, 707; Hunt, Benford, and Snow 1994; Johnston, Larana, and Gusfield 1994; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996, 6). Political scientists study the construction of norms against torture and other human rights abuses in the international arena (Finnemore 1996a, 1996b; Hawkins 2004). Across a range of substantive issues, interaction and negotiation are widely seen as important for explaining the development of shared meaning.

***Shared Meaning Affects Behavior*** These shared meanings in turn are thought to affect behavior. Empirical studies seek to provide evidence of such effects.

For example, in the international arena, substantial amounts of research demonstrate that countries that are integrated into the world system are more likely to behave like other countries than those that are isolated. The assumption is that integrated nations have notions of what is appropriate that are consistent with world norms, and they behave accordingly. For example, such research finds that national welfare systems result from countries' involvement in intergovernmental organizations (Thomas and Lauderdale 1988). Purchases of military weapons reflect the meanings associated with particular military hardware and do not necessarily serve national security needs (Eyre and Suchman 1996). Public education programs grow from the symbolic meaning of state-provided education and not so much from the needs of individuals and businesses (Meyer, Ramirez, and Soysal 1992). Such findings are taken as evidence that particular practices or ideologies are taken for granted—part of the cognitive frame through which actors see the world. This meaning, in turn, drives behavior.

The mechanisms at work are not completely clear, however (for a relevant discussion, see Scott 1995). Some formulations of the meanings approach explicitly frame it in opposition to consequentialist theories.



On this view, people do not rationally weigh the costs and benefits of their behavior. Rather, they internalize meanings and identities. Their sense of their identity and what is appropriate affects what they do (see, for example, March and Olsen 1998, 951).

Not all meanings scholars reject rational calculations outright. Some see both consequences and meaning as relevant. Many models are additive, showing that after taking consequences into account, meaning improves predictions (Schneiberg 2007). And some appear to acknowledge a role for external sanctions—again suggesting that interests matter. For example, Meyer and Rowan (1977) argue that the taken-for-granted nature of certain rules provides organizations with legitimacy that protects them from sanctions. That legitimacy may be necessary for an organization to survive (Schneiberg and Clemens 2006). Such views imply that actors consider the results of their decisions and that they prefer to avoid negative reactions. Even more explicitly, Powell (1991, 183) criticizes the tendency to present instrumentalist and meanings approaches in competition with each other. And DiMaggio and Powell (1983) point to coercion and external pressures as mechanisms through which legitimate practices are adopted by specific organizations. Thus, among those who favor meanings approaches, there is ambiguity about the extent to which meaning operates internally (constituting the identity of the actor) or in conjunction with social pressure. To the extent that social pressure operates, the reasons for such pressure (or lack thereof) are often left unexplored.

### *The Typicality Approach*

In practice, empirical work demonstrating the effect of meaning on behavior often finds evidence that actors tend to conform with the majority. This emphasis on conformity in the meanings literature is also found in the third major stream of norms research—the typicality approach. This approach suggests that existing patterns of behavior create normative pressures. In response to these pressures, individuals mimic others. On this view, why did Chinese mothers have their daughters' feet bound? Because that was what everyone else was doing.

Social psychologists have long studied the tendency of individuals to adjust their own behavior to be consistent with that of others'. Sherif's (1936) classic study examined this phenomenon. He shone a light on a screen and asked subjects to evaluate how much the light moved. In reality, it did not move at all. Any apparent shift was merely an optical illusion. Sherif found that estimates that individuals gave when they were part of a group were very similar, while those that isolated actors gave (without knowledge of others' judgments) were more diverse.

Later, Asch's (1951) experiments provided evidence that people would mimic others' choices, not only under conditions of uncertainty (as in Sherif's light studies), but also when those choices were clearly wrong. He showed subjects a set of three lines and asked them to match a fourth line to the one in the group of three that was closest in length. Before subjects made their decisions, however, seven other ostensible participants (confederates of the experimenter) made their choices. Asch found that when all the confederates chose the wrong line, subjects were more likely to choose the wrong line as well.

Contemporary psychological work looks at "descriptive norms." Descriptive norms refer to what people do. They are existing patterns of behavior (Cialdini, Kallgren, and Reno 1991). This research identifies conditions under which information about typical behavior in a particular setting affects an individual's choices. It shows, for example, that hotel guests are more likely to reuse their towels (thereby saving water) if they think that the majority of other guests do so. Visitors to a national park are more likely to steal petrified wood if they think that everyone else does (Cialdini 2007). Scholars explore related phenomena when they seek to understand herd behavior and bandwagons.

A popular intervention on college campuses—the "social norms" approach—similarly relies on the insight that people tend to follow the majority. Proponents argue that students drink too much and engage in other problematic behaviors because they misperceive the social norms on campus (Prentice and Miller 1993). The intervention strategy is to provide students with more accurate information—for example, about how much their peers really do drink. If students realize that others actually drink less than they thought, then they will change their be-

havior and drink less themselves. A number of campuses have tried this strategy with some success (see, for example, Frauenfelder 2001; Johannessen et al. 1999).

Substantial amounts of research demonstrate a human tendency to conform. But it also shows that the frequency of a behavior affects people through a variety of non-normative mechanisms. For example, individuals may have a taste for conformity (Jones 1984). They may think they will be at a competitive disadvantage if they do not do what others do (Abrahamson and Rosenkopf 1993). They may rely on patterns of behavior as a source of information about strategies that are likely to be successful (Banerjee 1992; Cialdini and Trost 1998; Gale 1996). Or the frequency of a behavior may actually change its value (Katz and Shapiro 1985). If an individual is the only person with a particular credit card, the value of the card will be low because there is no place to use it. But if many people have the same card, then businesses will do what they need to do to accept payment. The card will be widely useable and hence more valuable (Chwe 2001). All of these non-normative mechanisms help to account for individual conformity.

Further, there is little evidence that atypical behavior actually produces negative reactions. The tendency of an individual to conform with the majority is more pronounced when his behavior is public—suggesting that people anticipate social reactions (Deutsch and Gerard 1955). It is not clear that such reactions are actually forthcoming, however. A few scholars have argued that typical behavior triggers mechanisms that lead to punishment of deviations (Opp 1982; Ullmann-Margalit 1977; see also Bicchieri 2006), but there is little empirical work on the issue. Whereas there is substantial research on the tendency of actors to conform with the majority, there is much less work on the conditions under which atypical behavior is sanctioned (Hechter and Opp 2001, 401).

### A Relational Theory of Norm Enforcement

The three dominant approaches vary in the extent to which they focus on norm enforcement. Consequentialist research is the most explicit in addressing the enforcement problem. But a focus on the consequences

of behavior fails to explain much of the punishment we observe. For meanings scholars, sanctions may be unnecessary if people have internalized a sense of what is appropriate. To the extent that sanctioning is seen as an influence, it is usually not explained. Typicality approaches identify a number of mechanisms through which patterns of behavior affect individuals. Behavioral regularities may create pressures to conform. But the conditions under which those regularities produce sanctioning is unclear.

Despite the differences between them, these dominant perspectives on norms are similar in their emphasis on the characteristics of the regulated *behavior*—its consequences, its meaning, or its frequency. Debates between proponents of these approaches tend to focus on differences in assumptions about actors—most notably, whether they are instrumental or meaning-oriented (see, for example, Gintis et al. 2005; Ostrom, Gardner, and Walker 1994; Risse 2000). The characteristics of behavior in conjunction with (more or less rational) actors affect outcomes.

In this book, I accept that the characteristics of behavior identified by these approaches are important for understanding norms. I shift my focus to the characteristics of social relations. I build on insights from existing research to develop a theory that explains how a specific characteristic of social relations affects norm enforcement.

People enforce norms when they sanction—when they treat someone who engages in a particular behavior differently from those who do not. We might, for example, glare or yell at someone who cuts into line but say nothing to the others standing there. We might treat someone who sleeps with her best friend's boyfriend worse than someone who respects boundaries. We might give children time-outs for hitting others and hugs for behaving well. Informal sanctions are relative—treating people better or worse depending on how they behave.

As the consequentialist approach highlights, it is not at all obvious why people enforce norms. Indeed, there is good reason to expect them not to do so. Such sanctioning efforts may be time-consuming, emotionally draining, and potentially embarrassing. A mother may be too

tired to deal with her child running around the swimming pool deck; a coworker might not want to muster the energy it takes to confront a colleague about bad behavior. Sanctioners also run the risk of retaliation—anything from anger to ridicule to the end of a relationship to physical injury. An inner-city resident may reasonably be afraid to confront the drug dealers hanging out on the corner. Why, then, do people punish?

In some situations, sanctioning is essentially costless (Pettit 1993). For example, it happens as a side effect of something we were going to do anyway for another reason. Or, it occurs as people give respect or status to others (Brennan and Pettit 2004; McAdams 1997; but see Kitts 2006). Sometimes preventing ourselves from sanctioning takes effort. It may take self-control for us not to lose our temper at a particularly egregious action or at the child whose misbehavior has occurred one too many times. And sometimes sanctioning simply involves avoiding someone whose behavior suggests that he is unreliable.

But, much of the time, sanctioning is costly. It is uncomfortable to ask someone at a neighboring table not to smoke. It is physically dangerous to confront people engaged in criminal and violent behavior. Often it is easier just to let things slide—and hope that someone else takes care of the issue.

The problem inherent in sanctioning is illustrated by one of Aesop's fables, "The Mice in Council" (Coleman 1990, 270–71). The mice lived a very good life in a home with plenty of food. Their one problem was the cat who would eat the mice when they ventured out of their holes. The mice got together to decide what to do. They all agreed that the best solution was to put a bell around the cat's neck so that they would be able to hear the cat approaching in time to get to safety. All the mice enthusiastically applauded this suggestion until one wise old mouse asked, "Who is going to put the bell around the cat's neck?"

There were very large costs associated with attaching the bell to the cat—the altruistic martyr might be eaten. Similarly, there can be large costs associated with sanctioning. Given the costs, it is easier to do nothing—to hope that someone else addresses the problem, to hope that someone else will put the bell on the cat. Of course, if everyone does

this, then sanctioning does not occur and norms are weak or nonexistent. We know, however, that people *do* sanction. We see it all around us and adjust our own behavior in anticipation. Why do people sanction in the face of costs?

I argue that social relations are a key factor. A long history of research points to the importance of social relations for a range of outcomes. As early as the 1300s, Arab scholar Ibn Kaldhun emphasized the role of cohesion in tribal societies (Gellner 1988). Centuries later, in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville ([1835, 1840] 2000) expressed his fascination with groups and the contribution of voluntary associations to democracy. Soon after, sociologist Emile Durkheim (1951) pointed to the importance of social integration in the most personal of decisions, suicide.

Social capital research similarly emphasizes the importance of relationships. While definitions vary, social capital is generally thought to be “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity . . . that arise from them” (Putnam 2000, 19).<sup>5</sup> Networks are thought to be associated with strong norms—norms that encourage individuals to do things for others, even if those others cannot return the favor. These networks and norms are credited with producing a range of effects, including improved market performance and effective government (Putnam 1993).

This focus on social relations is also found in other contemporary research. The meanings approach to norms, for example, suggests that meanings are developed and have consequences in communities (see, for example, Guler, Guillén, and MacPherson 2002). Meanings are relevant in the context of relationships.

Similarly, social controls are imposed through groups and networks. Theoretical work suggests that members’ dependence on a group affects the demands that the group can make of them (Hechter 1987). Social psychologists report evidence that cohesive groups are better able to restrain their members than noncohesive groups (Homans 1950; but see Flache 1996; and Flache and Macy 1996). Criminologists highlight the importance of community cohesion for controlling criminal and delin-

quent behavior (Bursik and Grasmick 1993; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997). Legal scholars describe how tight-knit groups as diverse as New York diamond dealers, midwestern businessmen, and California cattle ranchers are able to resolve conflicts without turning to the law (Bernstein 1992; Ellickson 1991; Macauley 1963). Other legal work highlights the role of reciprocal relationships in sanctioning (see, for example, McAdams 1997; Posner 1996a).

This long and varied research tradition provides good reason to believe that social relations are important for a variety of outcomes—including norm enforcement. Yet norms researchers do not always pay attention to them explicitly. Further, the reasons for a connection between “groupness” and sanctioning are not well understood. Research suggests that social relations matter for norm enforcement, but it leaves unresolved many questions regarding how and why.

In this book I provide one answer. I assume that people care about what others think of them. This concern affects not only their behavior but also their sanctioning activity. When individuals make decisions about whether or not to punish someone, they consider the likely reactions of people around them.

If people care about how others treat them, then the structure of their relations matters. Not all relationships are equally influential. When people value their ties with others, they are dependent on those others. They are concerned with maintaining valued relationships and in provoking positive (rather than negative) reactions. This concern affects their enforcement decisions. Accordingly, variation in the strength of relationships—that is, variation in the social structure in which people are embedded—produces changes in sanctioning. In particular, interdependence increases norm enforcement.

In addition, if people care about how others treat them, then they will prefer to enforce norms that they think others want. But they have a problem. Their problem is determining just what behaviors others would like to see punished. Sometimes, the answer is easy. Acceptable practices are codified in laws and organizational rules. Groups come together to explicitly discuss and agree on appropriate behavior. Often,

however, there is no formal mechanism and people have to figure out things on their own. In order to do so, they need to look for clues as to what kinds of sanctioning people will approve. An important source of such clues is the characteristics of behavior—its consequences, meaning, and frequency. These characteristics provide the individual with indicators of the behaviors that people approve or disapprove, and in turn, the sanctioning efforts to which they will respond positively.

In sum, only part of norm enforcement is explained by the characteristics of behavior. Those characteristics provide information about the actions that people would like to see sanctioned. They provide clues regarding the sanctions people are likely to approve—thereby determining *what* gets sanctioned. The characteristics of social relations provide incentives that give people a reason to sanction—helping to account for *why* they do so.<sup>6</sup> This book explains these dynamics, laying out a relational theory of norm enforcement.

### Using Laboratory Experiments to Study Norms

In addition to presenting the theory, the book describes the empirical support. To test my theoretical ideas, I developed three standardized experimental settings—the Norms Game, the Metanorms Game, and the Expectations Game. I conducted a series of laboratory experiments in these settings. Taken together, the experimental results point to the importance of social relations for norm enforcement.

Experimental methods are a useful tool for testing the theory. Norms are difficult to study in naturally occurring settings. Even the essential task of identifying a norm can be a challenge. It is particularly hard to measure sanctioning. In surveys, people do not always accurately report their treatment of others or others' treatment of them. And researchers who try to observe sanctions are not able to be in all places at all times and therefore cannot get a complete picture. In addition to measurement challenges, researchers often face difficulties in disentangling causal relations. For example, do norms cause behavior? Do patterns of behavior lead to norm enforcement? Or both?



Lab experiments can help to address both challenges. Researchers can create manipulations that are consistent with the theoretical causal factors, and they can create settings in which outcome behaviors can easily be observed.

Further, because experiments involve random assignment to treatment conditions, inferences of causal order are more straightforward than when relying on other kinds of data. Random assignment is a strength of experimental methods—and a great help in disentangling causal relations in the context of norm enforcement.

I am interested in developing a theoretical understanding of norms that can then be applied to a variety of substantive settings. I seek to identify simple social structural features, the mechanisms they trigger, and the resulting norms. At this stage, I neither need nor want all of the complexity of the naturally occurring world. Laboratory experiments are perfect for my purposes.

### *Artificiality*

Some researchers question the utility of experimental methods. They argue that lab experiments have low external validity. They wonder how an experiment conducted in an artificial situation can tell us anything about social processes in everyday life. Such criticisms raise the question of whether, despite their value for testing causal theories, lab experiments can tell us anything useful about norms.

Zelditch (1969) provides the beginnings of an answer to this question. He wrote a piece entitled “Can You Really Study an Army in the Laboratory?” Many of us would quickly respond no—one can not replicate in the lab relationships between troops, the strains of the battlefield, or anything else that matters.

Zelditch argues otherwise. He admits that the lab is nothing like the real world. “If the idea is that the laboratory group resembles the smaller kinds of groups found in natural settings, then the idea is wrong. . . . [T]he laboratory group is not like any concrete setting in society” (Zelditch 1969, 528–29). We cannot create anything that looks and feels like a battlefield in the lab. In fact, to try to do so would be misguided. An experimental

setting that mimics naturally occurring situations provides little advantage. The purpose of the lab is not to recreate reality—with all of the attendant challenges of measurement and disentangling causal relations and mechanisms. Instead it is to “create certain theoretically relevant aspects of social situations under controlled conditions” (Zelditch 1969, 530).

In other words, once we have a theory, we develop a setting appropriate for testing that theory—one that excludes the confounding factors that might exist in naturally occurring situations. If the theory is supported, then we have greater confidence in it.

We should then apply it across a range of settings (Willer and Walker 2007). If a theory is supported both in the lab and in the field, then we have confidence not only in the theory but also in its usefulness for explaining real-world phenomena. If it is supported in lab, but not in the field, that suggests that additional, unidentified factors are interacting with the theoretical causal factors.<sup>7</sup> Such potential interactions can and should be explored further. This process will lead to theoretical development. A combination of lab experiments and field studies can effectively help us develop useful theoretical knowledge.

### *College Students as Subjects*

What about reliance on college students as subjects? One of the frequent objections to lab experiments is that college students may behave differently from other people. If so, how can relying on them be justified?

A key issue is whether the characteristics of the student participants interact in a systematic way with the causal factors of interest. Is there any reason to think, for example, that the relation between the harm caused by a behavior and reactions to that behavior would be different for college students than for community members in general (controlling for all other factors)? The consequentialist approach suggests that people will react more negatively to bigger losses. Suppose that college students really are different from others—imagine that they think less about the long term. Even if this is the case, they would presumably still dislike losing a thousand dollars more than ten dollars. Their shortsightedness might lead them to have a generally lower tendency to sanc-

tion, but one would still expect them to react more negatively to the larger loss. Only if subject characteristics interact with the theoretical causal factors (for example, students' short-sightedness led them to be more upset if they lost ten dollars than a thousand dollars), would we expect to see different results for college students than for others.

In other words, if college students are different from the general population, but those differences do not interact with the theoretical factors of interest, then we might well see higher or lower levels of overall norm enforcement with college students than with other populations. But the experimental manipulations would produce effects regardless of the subjects involved.

When I began my research on norms, I did not have any a priori reason to expect differences that might interact with the theoretical factors in which I was interested. Existing relevant research suggested little reason to expect non-college student populations to behave differently than students in the lab. Studies of social dilemmas in India, rural Colombia, and the Italian Alps, for example, have produced the same findings as those using American college students (Ostrom 2005, 93–97).<sup>8</sup>

Further, given the lack of information about differences across potential subgroups, it would be difficult to identify a superior subject pool. As a practical matter, it can be prohibitively expensive to do experiments with a national (or international) random sample. Researchers are generally, therefore, forced to choose a particular subject pool. Any nonrandomly selected pool would raise the same issue as college students. None would be representative of the general population. For all of these reasons, I relied on student participants, recognizing that future applied work may lead to modifications of the theory for different populations.

### The Plan of the Book

This book presents a new relational theory of norm enforcement and describes its empirical support. The theory identifies a particular characteristic of social relations—interdependence—and articulates key mechanisms linking it with norm enforcement.

Chapters 2 through 5 describe the basic research. They develop the theoretical argument and discuss the experimental results. Each chapter begins with an illustration that raises a theoretical question. I then present the theory, describe the experiments in broad strokes, summarize the findings, and conclude with a discussion. Readers interested in the methodological details can find them in the methods appendix.

In Chapter 6, I reflect on some of the substantive implications of the relational theory of norms. To begin to think about how useful the theory might be for explaining life outside of the lab, I apply the theory to several substantive issues: Why does the permissiveness of norms regulating heterosexual sex vary? How might norms contribute to an understanding of the informal control of crime and delinquency across neighborhoods? Why did nations support the International Criminal Court, making a costly commitment to the enforcement of human rights norms? Lab experiments are very useful for testing causal theories. To evaluate a theory's broader utility, it must be applied outside the lab. In this chapter I describe some beginning explorations.

Chapter 7 argues that norms do not exist in a vacuum. Rather, they operate side by side with government penalties and market incentives. Norms are often overlooked as a source of solutions to social problems, however. Further, policy interventions based on governments or markets may have unintended effects on norms. I discuss one way of thinking about the relation between norms and law and between norms and markets, and describe an experimental test of the predictions regarding the effect of a strong legal system on social relations. I also provide an illustration of how recognizing the power of social norms might affect the way we think about policy, focusing in particular on education.

Chapter 8 concludes the book by summarizing the key findings. I come back to the enforcement puzzles raised at the beginning of this chapter and discuss the solutions suggested by the theory. I describe what the theory tells us and what it leaves out, and I suggest an approach to integrating the diverse literature on norms and enforcement.

The key contribution of the book is that it describes how and why a particular characteristic of social relations affects norm enforcement. My intent is to add to the growing body of theoretical knowledge about norms. My hope is that increased theoretical understanding will have practical payoffs.