



The Anti-Norm Alexander Gershell

Abstract

This paper draws on extant accounts of social norms, and evaluates their ability to countenance the possibility of the anti-norm: a universally disliked, judged to be harmful, but enforced social norm. If all accounts considered can account for such a norm then it could theoretically exist, if only some account for this norm then a strong argument is created for the existence of this norm; if none account for this norm, then, such a norm could not exist. First, I will define my terms for both social norms and the anti-norm. Next, I will characterize three leading accounts of social norms. In section 3 I will argue for how some social norms don't fall into the definitions explained by the three accounts. In the section after, counter arguments will be examined and refuted. Lastly, I will conclude by sketching future ideas that could explain the persistence of norms that don't fit the definitions previously mentioned.

150 Characters

This paper characterizes anti-norms: social norms which are universally disliked, harmful, but which persist. Anti-norms challenge prominent accounts.

Introduction

Social norms are often treated as rules that persist because they serve some function, whether that function is coordinating behavior, expressing shared values, or maintaining group cohesion. Most social norms rely on three often implicit assumptions: that the majority of adherents benefit from it, that they believe it is useful to society, or that compliance with the norm is rewarding in some way, such as avoiding ostracism by others or sanctions imposed by those in power. This assumption raises a difficult question: can a norm persist even when no one benefits from it, no one believes in it, and everyone involved judges it to be harmful? This paper asks whether extant accounts of social norms can make sense of the possibility of a prevailing social norm that is universally disliked and judged to be deleterious. If every account considered can accommodate such a norm, that norm could theoretically exist. If only some accounts can accommodate it, a strong case emerges for its existence, since at least one plausible mechanism sustains it. If no account can accommodate it, then within the frame of this paper such a norm could not exist, and its existence would cry out for explanation.

The paper proceeds in five parts. The first section defines what counts as a norm for the purposes of this argument and introduces the concept this paper will call the anti-norm: a norm that is universally disliked and judged harmful while still functioning as a genuine, actively enforced norm rather than a habit, a law, or a fading custom. The second section lays out three distinct accounts of why norms exist and why people comply with them: a socialization account associated with Parsons and Scott, an expectations-based account associated with Bicchieri, and an evolutionary account of norm psychology associated with Henrich. The third section tests each account against real-world cases of the anti-norm and evaluates what the results suggest about the nature of social norms more broadly.

Section 1

For the purposes of this paper, a norm is defined as a behavioral regularity within a group that people follow at least partly because they expect other members of the group to follow it as well, and because they expect some form of social consequence if they do not, whether that consequence is internal guilt, external shame, or direct punishment. This definition is intentionally broad enough to be compatible with each of the three accounts examined in Section 2, since the goal of this paper is not to argue for one definition of a norm over another



but to test whether norms as each theorist understands them can accommodate a specific and difficult case.

That difficult case is what this paper will call the anti-norm: a norm that is universally disliked by the people who follow it, judged to be genuinely harmful by any reasonable external standard, and yet still functions as a real, actively enforced norm rather than something habitual like brushing your teeth twice a day, or maintaining a clean home environment.

This definition is narrower than it might first appear, because it excludes several categories of norms that resemble it on the surface. A law that people obey only because of police enforcement is not a norm under this definition, since compliance in that case is coerced rather than sustained by mutual social expectation. A norm that is fading, where younger members of a group no longer feel bound by it, is not universally disliked in the relevant sense, since its decline is explained by generational change rather than by the puzzle this paper investigates. Similarly, a norm that benefits some subset of the group at the expense of everyone else does not qualify, since in that case there is still a rational actor with an interest in sustaining the norm, which makes its existence unsurprising rather than puzzling.

The anti-norm, properly defined, has no such beneficiary. Everyone subject to the norm would be better off without it, and most people subject to it already know this, and yet the norm continues to be enforced through genuine social expectation and real cost for noncompliance. Several historical and modern cases demonstrate this pattern.

Footbinding in China, practiced for centuries before its collapse in the early twentieth century, was frequently described by the parents who carried it out as painful and regrettable, a tension captured in a Chinese saying quoted in Shih-Wen Sue Chen's research on missionary depictions of footbinding: "A mother can't love both her daughter and her daughter's feet at the same time."¹ (358) Yet no single family could abandon the practice without damaging their daughter's marriage prospects, since Chen notes that bound feet functioned as the dividing line between becoming a bride and becoming a servant in the household of another family.²

The norm against urinating in public pools supplies a different kind of case, one developed by philosophers Geoffrey Brennan, Lina Eriksson, Robert Goodin, and Nicholas Southwood specifically to test what makes something a genuine norm in the first place. In their hypothetical example, a group they call the Moldovans all judge that one should not urinate in a public pool, know that others share this judgment, disapprove of the behavior, and feel guilty when they do it themselves, yet every one of them violates the norm anyway, each privately believing, mistakenly, that everyone else is complying. As Gerald Gaus summarizes the case in his review of the book, the Moldovans "all have empirical expectations that are universally false."³ The authors use this case to argue that a norm can persist and continue to bind behavior even when its supposed empirical foundation, the belief that others are actually following it, is entirely false.

Another case includes hazing rituals that leave most participants with negative feelings about the experience yet continue to be passed down. A RAND review of hazing research found

¹Shih-Wen Sue Chen, "Paradoxical Performances: Cruel Constraints and Christian Emancipation in 19th–20th-Century Missionary Representations of Chinese Women and Girls," in *Divine Domesticities: Christian Paradoxes in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Margaret Jolly and Hyaeweol Choi (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014), 358.

²Chen, "Paradoxical Performances," 347–66.

³Gerald Gaus, review of *Explaining Norms*, by Geoffrey Brennan, Lina Eriksson, Robert E. Goodin, and Nicholas Southwood, *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*, January 16, 2014, 20, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/reviews/explaining-norms/>.

that “endurance of more-severe acts of hazing was associated with greater negative affect among initiates, and these negative feelings were associated with lower perceptions of group attractiveness,”⁴ directly contradicting the folk belief that hazing increases group liking. Despite this, the same review found that 92 percent of midshipmen in the 2005–2009 cohorts at the U.S. Naval Academy had been hazed at least once, even after major reform efforts followed a 1992 GAO investigation into the practice.⁵ Each of these cases will be used in Section 3 to test a specific weakness in one of the three accounts discussed below, since each case is chosen not merely to illustrate that anti-norms exist but to press against the particular mechanism that account depends on.

Section 2

Applied to the three accounts, the first treats norm compliance as a product of socialization, though two related versions of this view differ in an important way. Parsons's version holds that people come to follow the norms of the culture they grow up in largely because those norms are absorbed during childhood as part of a broader process of socialization, becoming part of how a person understands the world rather than a set of external rules imposed on them later in life. Parsons himself defined a norm as “a verbal description of a concrete course of action... regarded as desirable.”⁶ Scott's version shares the premise that norms are internalized during upbringing but locates the mechanism of compliance more specifically in anticipated shame and guilt, the idea that a person who has internalized a norm develops an internal sanctioning system so that violating the norm produces guilt even with no observer present.⁷

Applied to tipping at a restaurant, the Parsons and Scott versions would explain why most American diners tip roughly twenty percent even when they will never see the server again and no legal mechanism forces them to pay anything beyond the bill. Since American children are raised watching their parents tip and are frequently told directly that tipping is the right thing to do, the norm becomes part of how they understand a restaurant transaction long before they can articulate why. Applied to queuing, the same logic would explain why people in a long line rarely need to be told to wait their turn, since a person raised inside orderly queuing cultures has simply absorbed first-come-first-served as an internalized standard of fairness.

The second account, developed by Bicchieri, breaks from the socialization family by locating the source of norm compliance not in early internalization but in ongoing social expectation. The game-theoretic tradition her work belongs to holds that “a norm is broadly defined as an equilibrium of a strategic interaction,”⁸ existing only when two conditions are met simultaneously: an empirical expectation that other people are actually performing the behavior and a normative expectation that other people believe the behavior ought to be performed. Applied to tipping, this account would say a diner tips not simply because of an internalized belief but because they expect nearly every other diner in the restaurant to tip and expect that those other diners think tipping is the right thing to do. Applied to queuing, a person joining a

⁴Kirsten M. Keller, Miriam Matthews, Kimberly Curry Hall, William Marcellino, Jacqueline A. Mauro, and Nelson Lim, *Hazing in the U.S. Armed Forces: Recommendations for Hazing Prevention Policy and Practice* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), 27.

⁵Keller et al., *Hazing in the U.S. Armed Forces*, sec. “The Effects of and Motivations for Hazing,” 23–42.

⁶Cristina Bicchieri, Ryan Muldoon, and Alessandro Sontuoso, “Social Norms,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2023 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman, 75, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/social-norms/>.

⁷Bicchieri, Muldoon, and Sontuoso, “Social Norms.”

⁸Bicchieri, Muldoon, and Sontuoso, “Social Norms,” sec. 5.

brand-new line has typically never internalized anything about that specific queue and instead simply observes that everyone present is waiting their turn and infers that everyone present believes that is what they ought to do.

The third account, developed by Henrich, treats norm compliance as the product of an evolved psychological capacity shaped jointly by genetic and cultural inheritance. Henrich's cross-cultural evidence comes from Ultimatum Game experiments conducted over nearly two decades across roughly two dozen societies, beginning with his 1995 fieldwork among the Matsigenka in the Peruvian Amazon, where participants "were happy to be offered any money in the game" and showed no expectation of an equal split.⁹ (20) This pattern of departing from self-interested play to align with local norms rather than personal gain supports Henrich's broader claim that norm psychology, not rational calculation, governs much of human cooperative behavior.

Applied to tipping, this account predicts the decision is fast and largely unreflective. Henrich cites David Rand's finding that participants who decided quickly in Public Goods Games contributed more than those who deliberated, and that imposing time pressure increased cooperation while forced reflection decreased it, leading Henrich to conclude that "quick, gut responses were more cooperative"¹⁰ (18) than calculated ones.

Applied to queuing, the account predicts that queue-jumping triggers immediate, largely automatic irritation. Henrich's strongest evidence here is Tomasello's puppet experiments, in which three-year-olds who watched a confident model perform an arbitrary task spontaneously scolded a puppet for doing it differently, protesting in normative language despite receiving no adult instruction to do so.¹¹ Henrich treats this as evidence that humans infer social rules automatically and react to violations with a negative response, a tendency he generalizes across both fairness violations (economic games) and arbitrary rule violations (the puppet).
Section 3

Having laid out the three accounts and the anti-norm cases meant to test them, this section walks through what happens when each account is asked to explain its designated case. The pattern that emerges is not simply that each account fails, but that each fails in a distinct way tied to the specific mechanism it depends on, which matters for what the paper concludes in Section 4.

Footbinding remains the clearest failure for the socialization account associated with Parsons. Parsons's model requires that compliance comes from an internalized belief in the norm's legitimacy, absorbed during childhood socialization and carried forward as part of how a person understands proper conduct. Chen's research shows mothers performing the practice on their daughters while explicitly regarding it as painful and wrong, which means the belief Parsons's model requires as the engine of compliance was simply not present. If internalization were doing the work Parsons claims, the emotional state driving compliance should resemble moral conviction rather than reluctant participation in something openly regarded as harmful. Footbinding shows the opposite pattern: compliance persisted for generations despite the demonstrated absence of the belief that it was the correct course of action.

Hazing creates a related but more precise problem for Scott's account, which locates compliance not in a passively absorbed worldview but in the anticipation of internal shame or

⁹Joseph Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success: How Culture Is Driving Human Evolution, Domesticating Our Species, and Making Us Smarter* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 20.

¹⁰Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success*, 18.

¹¹Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success*.

guilt tied specifically to violating an internalized normative standard. The difficulty is that when hazing participants describe what they actually feel ashamed of, the object of that shame is not the act of breaking a rule about initiation. It is the personal lack of courage involved in refusing to endure the ordeal. A pledge who backs out is not typically described by his peers, or by himself afterward, as someone who violated a norm. He is described as someone who lacked the courage to get through it. That distinction matters for Scott's account because it locates the emotional sanction somewhere his model does not. Shame over cowardice is a judgment about a personal virtue, courage, that exists independently of any specific social rule requiring hazing to occur in the first place. A person can feel ashamed of lacking courage in a context with no norm attached to it at all, which means the shame forcing hazing compliance may not be evidence of an internalized normative standard being violated, but evidence of a separate psychological mechanism, self-assessment against a courage standard, that happens to get triggered by hazing without being generated by it. If that is right, Scott's account is not so much refuted as shown to be diagnosing the wrong emotional target, mistaking a virtue-based shame response for a norm-based one.

Bicchieri's account runs into a more structural problem when tested against the norm against urinating in public pools, an example associated with Geoffrey Brennan's work on norms and social esteem. Bicchieri's definition requires both an empirical expectation that others are complying and a normative expectation that others believe compliance is correct. What makes the pool case a useful stress test is that surveys and chemical tests on pool use have repeatedly found that a substantial share of swimmers, in some studies close to half, privately admit to violating the norm, and elite competitive swimmers report the practice as close to universal within their own ranks. A 2012 survey conducted for the American Chemistry Council found that roughly one in five American adults admitted to having urinated in a public pool, and other surveys have put the figure as high as 40 percent.¹² Independent of self-report, a 2017 chemical analysis measuring the artificial sweetener acesulfame potassium, which passes through the body unmetabolized and is excreted only in urine, found the compound present in all 31 pools and hot tubs sampled across two Canadian cities, with an average of roughly 30 to 75 liters of urine estimated per pool.¹³ That evidence suggests the empirical expectation, the belief that others are actually complying, is often weak or simply false, even though public compliance with the norm remains close to universal and social disapproval of violation remains strong whenever the behavior becomes visible. If people are complying with a norm they privately suspect most others are quietly breaking, sustained apparently by the normative expectation alone rather than by a genuine belief about what others are doing, that is a case Bicchieri's dual-condition definition does not obviously predict, since her account treats the empirical and normative expectations as jointly necessary rather than allowing the normative expectation to carry the full weight on its own.

What ties these three cases together is that each account fails for a reason specific to its own defining mechanism rather than for a single shared reason. Parsons fails because the belief his theory requires was never present. Scott fails because the emotion his theory identifies appears to be applied to something other than norm violation. Bicchieri fails because the expectation her theory treats as necessary appears to be optional in practice.

¹²Michael Freemantle, "Acesulfame Potassium," *Chemistry World* (podcast), Royal Society of Chemistry, <https://www.chemistryworld.com/podcasts/acesulfame-potassium/3008373.article>.

¹³Lindsay K. Jmaiff Blackstock, Wei Wang, Sai Vemula, Benjamin T. Jaeger, and Xing-Fang Li, "Sweetened Swimming Pools and Hot Tubs," *Environmental Science & Technology Letters* 4, no. 4 (2017): 149–53.

Section 4

These three cases put pressure on the accounts of norms considered in section 2. How might defenders of these accounts respond?

For the example of urinating in pools, one could argue that Scott's definition, which places an emphasis on internalized shame as a mechanism for norm compliance, fares better in a case where behavior does not correspond to the presence of a norm. Despite clear empirical evidence for the widespread behavior of peeing in pools, I would expect the average person to be less than eager to admit to their transgression. This hesitancy would stem from fear of shame and ostracization from those around them, because it is normally deemed strange to openly admit to peeing in pools. The idea of shame for breaking the norm despite evidence of others doing so would still align with Scott's definition of a social norm because the shame of breaking the norm still exists as it is not openly admitted. Moreover, as I read him, Scott does not claim a behavioral regularity is necessary a social norm to exist. Hence, the pool urination example poses little challenge.

As for footbinding, while there is evidence that many opposed the practice, many people also believed in its validity. The fact that opinions were mixed complicates one definition of the anti-norm, since it was not universally disliked.

Lastly, in response to the hazing example, one could counter that the shame does, in fact, stem from a lack of norm compliance. There is probably some personal embarrassment tied to not being bold enough to endure the physical and mental strain hazing demands, but the main catalyst for the shame is watching others comply with the norm and get accepted for it. The shame is norm-based after all.

I will now defend the arguments above against these three forms of pushback. First, the response concerning the urination case defends the wrong account. The pool case was chosen to test Bicchieri's theory, and Bicchieri's model needs both the empirical expectation and the normative expectation working together. If shame is what actually keeps people quiet about breaking the norm, that confirms the empirical expectation was never doing much work in this case to begin with. Switching to Scott's account doesn't fix the coordination theory's problem. It just admits the problem is real and finds a different theory to paper over it. Scott's view has his own issue here too. Section 3 already showed his shame mechanism can get redirected onto something other than the norm, courage instead of rule-breaking in the hazing case. The same thing could easily be happening with pools. Someone might stay quiet because they broke a shared rule, or they might stay quiet because urinating in public is embarrassing on its own, rule or no rule. Nothing in the counter tells these two apart.

The footbinding counter leans on the idea that mixed opinion means the practice wasn't universally disliked, but Chen's own evidence cuts against that. The idea that a mother can't love both her daughter and her daughter's feet isn't praising footbinding. It's someone picking the lesser of two bad options in a marriage market that punished daughters without bound feet. Parsons's account needs people to believe the norm is correct. Choosing the practice because the alternative is worse isn't the same as believing it's correct. Once stated justification and actual preference get separated, the mixed-opinion evidence supports the anti-norm rather than opposing it.

The hazing counter is the strongest of the three because it actually engages Scott directly, but it mixes up two different things: how the norm spreads and what an individual is ashamed of. Watching others comply and get rewarded for it explains why hazing keeps getting passed down. It doesn't explain what a quitter is actually ashamed of. The RAND data still

points the other way. Participants talk about endurance and toughness, not about breaking a rule.

Conclusion

This paper set out to test whether the anti-norm, a norm that is universally disliked, judged harmful, and still actively enforced, can be explained by any of the leading accounts of why norms exist. The answer that emerged from examples involving footbinding, hazing, and public pool urination is not simply that the three theories considered struggle with certain cases. Each one fails for a reason built into its own core mechanism. The Parsonian framework needs an internalized belief in the norm's legitimacy, whose presence the footbinding case challenges. Scott's theory relies upon a sense of shame that attaches to the violation itself, and the hazing case shows shame pointing somewhere else entirely, toward personal cowardice rather than rule-breaking. Bicchieri's coordination model needs an empirical expectation running alongside the normative one, and the pool data shows compliance persisting even when that empirical expectation is demonstrably false for most of the people involved. The counterexamples raised in Section 4 don't close these gaps. Rather, they relocate the explanation to a different theory or lean on emotional evidence too ambiguous to settle whether the definitions actually explain the behavior. The counterexamples must use empirical evidence which shows norm compliance based purely on the ideas explained in the theories above. If compliance is due to reasons not outlined in the papers' three accounts, then the norm's persistence would be due to factors not covered in this paper.

That result matters beyond these three cases. If the major accounts of social norms all assume, in one form or another, that some rational or psychological benefit to the individual is what sustains compliance, and if a real category of norms exists where that benefit is absent for everyone involved, then something is missing from how norms are currently theorized. The anti-norm isn't a rare curiosity. Footbinding lasted centuries. Hazing survives active institutional reform. Pool urination persists worldwide despite universal public disapproval. A theory of norms that can't account for cases this common and this well documented has an obvious hole. What this paper hasn't done is explain what actually sustains an anti-norm, only that the three leading candidates can't. A fuller answer probably requires looking past individual psychology altogether and toward structural explanations: how a norm can be kept alive by differences between generations, by the absence of any coordinated way to opt out simultaneously, or by punishment structures that don't require any individual enforcer to personally believe in the norm they're enforcing. Coordination models, where everyone would prefer to defect but no one can trust that others will defect at the same time, seem like a promising next step, since the pool case already gestures toward something like this without fully explaining it. Future work on the anti-norm would do well to start there.

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