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INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF NORMS

THE CONCEPT OF 'norms' is central to sociology, but we know very little about what norms are and how they relate to social action. Norms can be loosely defined as shared conceptions of appropriate or expected action. This study attempts to advance our understanding of norms by analyzing the norms of a particular community and by considering two theories of how norms affect action.

The first part of the book presents a systematic description of the normative system of a Mexican community. A new method of describing norms is used to construct a model of the norms of Zinacantan, a Maya Indian township in southern Mexico. The model identifies Zinacantan categories of good and bad action, and suggests that the structure of norms corresponds to the major institutions and formal organizations of the community.

The second part of the book contrasts two theoretical perspectives on norms and social action. The Parsonian theory of the socialized actor is restated, and I show that this theory is not supported by previous research and that it does not explain the relation between norms and action in Zinacantan. An alternative perspective, based on the concept of social identity, seems to provide a better explanation of how norms function in society.

The concept of norms

Social scientists have proposed many different definitions of norms. According to Williams, 'Norms ... are rules of conduct; they

specify what should and should not be done by various kinds of social actors in various kinds of situations ...' (1960:24-5). Sherif defines social norms as 'frames of reference' or standardized ways of regulating activities and perceiving the world (1965:24-5). Others have defined norms as standards, patterns, statements or prescriptions that govern people's conduct or specify what people ought to do (Gibbs, 1965). Most definitions also include the idea that people are rewarded if they conform to norms and are punished if they deviate.

The concept of norms is ambiguous because it has been used to refer to most of the social and cultural part of human action, including values, laws, moral codes, customs, expectations for behavior and shared meaning. However, for the purposes of this study, it is not necessary to distinguish all the types and aspects of norms.

This chapter presents a working definition of norms that is useful for achieving the two goals of the study: developing a method for describing the norms of a community, and comparing two theories of the relation between norms and action. These goals require a definition of norms that includes part of the traditional meaning of the concept and that fits both theories of norms and action. The definition also should suggest a method for describing norms independently of action.

The following discussion distinguishes three types of normative beliefs that I label ranking norms, reality assumptions and membership norms. Then I consider the interpretation of norms in the theory of the socialized actor and the social identity approach. Finally, I discuss how to define norms independently of action. The chapter concludes with an outline of the book.

Three types of normative beliefs

The central theme in most discussions of norms is that norms are standards for evaluating or ranking people as good or bad, better or worse. This type of normative belief, which I label *ranking norms*, is the main focus of this book.

Ranking norms are used to evaluate differentially actions or individuals, on the basis of how well they conform to some standard.¹ They define the actions and attributes that distinguish a particular rank or status. For example, among professors, the belief that 'good professors publish high-quality papers' is a ranking norm.

Ranking norms focus on behavior that *varies* within the community, because without variation, differential evaluation is logically

¹For an interesting interpretation of norms in terms of ranking or stratification, see Dahrendorf's essay, 'The Origin of Inequality' (1968).

impossible.¹ These norms are the basis for the everyday process of evaluating and justifying behavior, and selecting among alternative courses of action. They are constantly restated in daily gossip and in instructing children and others how to behave; therefore, the members of a community tend to be fairly conscious of them.

Reality assumptions are taken-for-granted understandings about what good and bad actions are meaningful or possible in a given context.² For example, according to the reality assumptions of my culture, a professor who appears at his lecture course and sings for an hour is engaging in meaningless or crazy behavior.

Reality assumptions affect behavior by restricting the sphere of meaningful acts. Actions that are defined as meaningful or possible will be noticed and taken seriously, and will elicit a response that is determined by the particular meaning of the act. Meaningless behavior is like a message in a private language. Such behavior will either be ignored or it will be treated as not serious (crazy, silly, mistaken) and will elicit responses appropriate for all crazy behavior. By definition, reality assumptions are taken for granted. If people begin to consider and discuss behavior that previously was meaningless, the behavior ceases to be meaningless. For this reason, it is very difficult to measure reality assumptions.

The third type of normative conception, called *membership norms*, combines some of the characteristics of ranking norms and reality assumptions. Membership norms are the standards for including or accepting a person within a group or social position. They apply equally to all group members and are not the basis for ranking.³ An example of a membership norm for professors is the belief that 'professors are skilled at reading and writing.' This belief is not a ranking norm

¹The distinction between ranking norms and other shared beliefs about behavior first emerged in the early stages of this study, when I attempted to elicit normative beliefs by asking people to complete sentences like, 'He is good because ...' To my surprise, the three men who produced thousands of normative statements in completing the sentences, never once mentioned a behavior pattern that did not vary in the community.

²These beliefs are labeled 'reality assumptions' instead of 'norms' for two reasons. First the term 'assumption' conveys the idea that these beliefs are more general than ranking or membership norms. Second, the term 'norm' is traditionally defined as a standard or rule that is applied to a (meaningful) act or object. However, reality assumptions are beliefs that constitute or define social reality; it seems misleading to conceive of them as standards applied to this reality. See the discussion in Chapter 9.

³This phrase concerning 'equal applicability' needs to be qualified to allow for different membership norms for different roles. Thus, the beliefs about being a member in good standing of a church are likely to be different for men and women. The distinction between ranking and membership norms is similar to Kimberley's (n.d.) distinction between task norms and non-task norms.

because there is not enough variance in literacy to differentiate among professors. Deviation from this norm is rare, and literacy tends to be taken for granted as a customary part of the professor role.

The distinction between ranking and membership norms often depends on what social system the researcher or community member is using as a reference point. For instance, within the university, writing a Ph.D. thesis is a membership norm for professors. However, from the perspective of the larger educational system, writing a thesis is a ranking norm that differentiates professors from school teachers.

These three types of normative beliefs have been defined to fit the particular emphases of this book. First, the book focuses on normative beliefs about particular roles or identities. It does not consider beliefs about people or society in general, for example, the belief that 'stores expect payment in money, not in kind,' or 'cars should be driven on the right side of the road.' Second, the book focuses on norms, or beliefs about specific situations. It does not explicitly consider values, or more abstract beliefs that have no clear implications for particular actions (see Kluckhohn, 1961; Blake and Davis, 1964). However, some of the measures and findings are also useful for understanding values. For other typologies of normative beliefs, see Gibbs (1965), Rokeach (1968) and Cicourel (1972).

My study of norms in Zinacantan focuses on ranking norms in particular because of the goals of the study. One goal was to develop a rigorous method for describing the norms of a community independently of behavior. To achieve this, it seemed preferable to consider ranking norms and avoid the difficulties of trying to describe normative beliefs that Zinacantecos are unaware of and take for granted.

The second goal of the study was to compare two theoretical perspectives on norms and action in the light of the evidence from the Zinacantan study and previous research: the theory of the socialized actor and the social identity approach. The theory of the socialized actor attempts to explain why people conform to ranking norms and has little to say about reality assumptions and membership norms. In addition, almost all previous research on norms and action considers only ranking norms. For these reasons, this study focuses on ranking norms, although the other types of beliefs will be considered in the last chapter.

Two theories of norms and action

Before going on to consider the definition of ranking norms in more detail, the two theoretical perspectives will be briefly sum-

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marized. The summary previews the major issues in the second part of the book. It also provides a basis for showing that my definition and measures of ranking norms are 'theoretically neutral' in the sense that they fit both theories of norms and action.

The theory of the socialized actor is the most influential conception of norms and social action in contemporary sociology. The starting point for this approach is the conception of the individual actor, who orients himself to the situation and then makes decisions so as to maximize his personal goals. This potentially anarchic individual is harnessed to society through the internalization of norms and values. During childhood socialization and throughout life, individuals develop needs and goals that correspond to social expectations. As a result of this process, the individual members of a society are motivated to conform to shared norms; they want to do what they are supposed to do.

One basic assumption in this theory is that action is a process in which individuals choose between alternatives so as to satisfy their goals and wants. A second assumption is that norms affect action by becoming integrated with an individual's goals and wants. People's actions conform to the norms insofar as they believe that conformity is good and deviance is bad, and at the same time, they want to conform and feel guilty or frustrated if they deviate.

The first assumption leads to a focus on ranking norms or standards for evaluating alternative actions. Since the theory focuses on choice among possible actions, it tends to minimize the importance of the taken-for-granted beliefs that delimit possible actions and define the minimal criteria for group membership. The second assumption leads to interpreting conformity to norms as the result of an individual's personal beliefs and motives. For example, according to the theory of the socialized actor, a woman will conform to the norm that she should enter a 'nurturant' occupation like nursing or teaching insofar as she has a need to be nurturant and believes that for her being nurturant is morally good.

The social identity approach starts with the conception of the collective definition and maintenance of social identities. Action is viewed as a process in which individuals communicate to each other that they are particular kinds of people. Action also includes collectively defining new identities. Norms are interpreted as shared conceptions about what identities or roles exist and what actions and attributes define a person as a member in good standing with a particular rank.

This perspective leads to a focus on reality assumptions and membership norms as well as ranking norms. It also suggests that individuals conform to norms insofar as the norms specify how to obtain

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validation for an important identity. For example, from this perspective, a woman will conform to the norms about being a teacher or nurse if she perceives that significant others will validate her identity as a woman if she enters these occupations. In the social identity approach, the woman's personality is not important; she may or may not have strong personal beliefs or feelings about being nurturant. What is important is her perception of the identity implications of different occupations.

These two theoretical perspectives lead to different ways of defining and talking about norms. The theory of the socialized actor suggests that ranking norms should be defined as shared standards for evaluation, or as beliefs about what actions and attributes are good and bad. From this perspective, a description of the norms of university professors would include statements like: 'Most professors believe that they ought to publish high quality papers.'

The social identity approach suggests that ranking norms be defined as shared perceptions about what actions or attributes will cause others to validate the identity of being a high-ranking person or a low-ranking person. Norms would be described in a different language, e.g., 'Most professors perceive that they must publish high quality papers in order to be defined as good, high-ranking professors.'

The definition and description of ranking norms that is presented in the first part of this book tries to encompass both theoretical perspectives. Ranking norms are defined as *shared beliefs about what actions and attributes bring respect and approval (or disrespect and disapproval) from oneself and others*.¹ The method for describing the norms of Zinacantan can be interpreted as measuring beliefs about what is good, or as measuring perceptions about what actions validate the identity of being a respected, high ranking person.

Distinguishing ranking norms from action

The relation between ranking norms and action cannot be considered unless the two concepts are defined independently from one another. Norms cannot be directly observed; therefore they must be inferred from some verbal or non-verbal act. However, if the relation between norms and action *A* is being examined, norms cannot be inferred from action *A*.

¹In discussions of ranking norms throughout this book, I often refer only to positive evaluations (respect, approval, high rank) and do not mention negative evaluations (disrespect, disapproval, low rank). I do this to simplify the exposition, but readers should remember that ranking norms include negative evaluations.

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The distinction between norms and action is often unclear in sociological discussions. Bierstedt defines a norm as 'a rule or standard that governs our conduct . . .' (1963:222). Harry Johnson defines a norm as 'an abstract pattern, held in the mind, that sets certain limits for behavior' (1960:8). Statements like these imply that norms, by definition, govern conduct, limit behavior or affect action. Other definitions of norms, and the closely related concept of role, equate norms with predictions of behavior. Predictions or expectations about how another person will behave are based on information about the past actions of the person, or others like him. Therefore, as Gross *et al.* point out (1958:58-9), if norms are defined as predictions, there will obviously be a positive relationship between norms and action insofar as action is consistent over time.

These problems are avoided by defining ranking norms as shared *beliefs*. My usage follows the suggestions of Homans, who defines a norm as 'an idea in the minds of the members of a group, an idea that can be put in the form of a statement specifying what the members or other men should do, ought to do, are expected to do, under given circumstances . . .' Norms 'are not behavior itself, but what people think behavior ought to be' (1950:124). A similar definition is used by Blake and Davis, who define a norm as 'any standard or rule that states what human beings should or should not think, say, or do under given circumstances' (1964:456).

However, defining norms as shared beliefs about appropriate action raises a major problem because it is too broad. It includes beliefs that obviously are not taken seriously and do not affect action, such as 'automobile drivers should not exceed the exact speed limit.' In addition, it provides no criteria for distinguishing beliefs that clearly seem to be norms, such as 'mothers should provide food for their children,' from beliefs that seem more difficult to categorize, such as 'girls ought to act dumber than boys' or 'you should get eight hours of sleep every night.'

The definition of norms must include some reference to action or sanctions in order to resolve these problems. The working definition of ranking norms accomplishes this by limiting the concept of norms to those beliefs that are perceived to be related to a particular kind of sanction: the granting of respect and approval by oneself and others. According to this definition, 'girls ought to act dumber than boys' is a norm insofar as people believe that conforming to that statement will bring approval and respect, or will validate a person's identity as a high ranking member of a group.

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The definition of ranking norms refers to people's perceptions or beliefs about a particular kind of sanction.¹ In contrast, most definitions of norms refer to actual, observable sanctions. For example, Broom and Selznick's textbook, *Sociology*, introduces the concept as follows: 'All societies have rules or norms specifying appropriate and inappropriate behavior, and individuals are rewarded or punished as they conform to or deviate from the rules' (1963:68). And Homans qualifies his definition of norms, that was cited previously, as follows: 'A statement of the kind described is a norm only if any departure of real behavior from the norm is followed by some punishment' (1950:123). The typical definition of norms is a combination of two elements: (1) shared rules or beliefs about how people should act, (2) that are backed by sanctions, or are the criteria for reward and punishment (Blake and Davis, 1964:456).

There is a major drawback in identifying norms with actual sanctioning patterns. If norms are defined as the criteria for reward and punishment, then the hypothesis of a positive relation between norms and action looks very much like a behaviorist learning theory. The statement 'people tend to behave in conformity with the norms' becomes equivalent to the statement 'people tend to behave so as to maximize reward and minimize punishment.' This can easily degenerate into a tautology, given the difficulty of defining punishment and reward for an individual independent of the individual's behavior.

A behaviorist approach to norms has been proposed by John Finley Scott.² He defines a norm as 'a pattern of sanctions. More exhaustively, a norm consists of changes in the rates of emission of activities susceptible to reinforcement by social reinforcers' (1971:72). In other words, norms are equivalent to socially determined behavior. One problem with this approach is that it makes it almost impossible to examine the relation between norms and social action.³ Another problem

¹If ranking norms were defined as the criteria for the actual allocation of approval, then, since people may not be aware of their norms, the best way of measuring norms would be to observe the distribution of approval in daily interaction. With this approach the statement that norms determine behavior becomes equivalent to Homans' behaviorist theory, which asserts that rewards determine behavior and that social approval is a very important reward (1961:34-5).

²Scott rejects the usefulness of defining norms as beliefs or shared conceptions because he thinks that a phenomenological approach must depend on the method of introspection, and that it is impossible to verify scientifically statements about what people think. This book presents a method that shows how people's beliefs can be measured. See the discussion in Chapter 2, also Cancian (1971).

³Scott states that norms are not identical with behavior because rates of activity are also affected by other factors besides norms, such as non-social reinforcers and metabolism.

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is that it is misleading to lump all social determinants of action together, under the concept of social reinforcers. After accomplishing this theoretical simplification, Scott proceeds to distinguish many types of reinforcers, including super-empirical sanctions, and reinforcers that continue to affect behavior years after they occur.

The translation of phenomenological sociology into learning theory does serve to remind us that most social action is 'learned' or is caused by past and present experience.¹ But it leaves us with the task of explaining how particular types of social actions, including the statement of shared beliefs, affect other actions.

In sum, in order to achieve the goals of this study, the following definition of norms will be used: Ranking norms are shared beliefs about what actions and attributes bring respect and approval from oneself and others. This definition is consistent with the traditional interpretation of norms as standards of evaluation. It fits with the conception of norms in both the theory of the socialized actor and the social identity approach. Finally, it suggests that norms can be measured independently of action by asking people to state their beliefs about how approval, respect and rank are obtained in their community.

Outline of the book

The first part of this book (Chapters 2 through 6) presents a new method for describing the ranking norms of a community, and applies this method to analyze the normative system of Zinacantan. Chapter 2 reviews previous methods for measuring norms and values, and argues that adequate measures should be based on a description of norms from the actor's point of view. In particular, a researcher should describe the actions that members of a community view as good and bad, before attempting to measure variation in norms across individuals.

Following a brief description of the community of Zinacantan in Chapter 3, a new method for describing norms is presented in detail in Chapter 4. This method provides a systematic way of describing how the members of a community define good and bad actions. The method includes two major steps. First, the domain of norms is identified by asking Zinacantecos to complete part-sentences like 'He is good because ...' Then subjects are asked to sort the norms according to similarity. The results of the sorting task identify the major clusters of norms in the community.

¹See Campbell (1961) for an excellent, convincing presentation of the argument that the statements in learning theory can be translated into cognitive-phenomenological theory, and vice versa.

This method produced a model of the norms of Zinacantan, which is analyzed in Chapter 5. The model consists of nine clusters of norms that define the major ways of being a good, high-ranking man or a bad low-ranking man. For example, one cluster focuses on being religious, and one concerns being drunk and violent.

The model provides, for the first time, a rigorous description of the norms of a community from the actor's point of view. The model also suggests some general hypotheses about the relation between norms and social structure. In particular, the most important norms seem to refer to the major formal organizations of the community.

Chapter 6 describes three independent tests that confirmed the validity of this model of Zinacanteco norms. The tests include a repetition of the sorting task with a new set of norms, a survey questionnaire on norms and action, and an interview in which particular individuals were rated on some of the traits described by the norms. The results of these tests show that the norm clusters represent stable cognitive categories that Zinacantecos use in a variety of situations. Readers who are primarily interested in the structure of Zinacanteco norms can skip Chapters 2 and 6, and will be most interested in Chapter 5. Readers who are concerned with the methodology of describing norms should focus on Chapters 2, 4, 5 and 6.

The second part of the book (Chapters 7 through 9) compares two theoretical approaches to norms and social action. Chapter 7 outlines the theory of the socialized actor, and shows that previous research on norms, attitudes and behavior do not confirm the theory. However, these data are usually ignored by sociologists, because rarely do studies explicitly focus on the major norms of a community.

The results of the survey of norms and action in Zinacantan, described in Chapter 8, are more relevant to the theory of the socialized actor. Valid questions about norms were constructed on the basis of the model of norm clusters, and the measures of action concerned important decisions in Zinacanteco life. Thus, some of the important deficiencies of previous studies have been eliminated. The results of the survey do not support the theory, and show that the norms and actions of individuals are not positively correlated. These negative findings imply that the theory should be substantially revised or rejected.

The final chapter discusses the social identity approach to norms. This approach implies that norms are attributes of groups, not individuals, and can change rapidly without intensive interaction or internalization. The major propositions of the social identity approach are supported by some previous studies and they suggest some promising new lines of research on norms and social action.