

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10679-5 - What are Norms?: A Study of Beliefs and Action in a Maya Community

Francesca M. Cancian

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

WHAT ARE NORMS?

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10679-5 - What are Norms?: A Study of Beliefs and Action in a Maya Community

Francesca M. Cancian

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

WHAT ARE

A Study of Beliefs

FRANCESCA M. CANCIAN

*Assistant Professor of Sociology
Stanford University*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10679-5 - What are Norms?: A Study of Beliefs and Action in a Maya Community

Francesca M. Cancian

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

NORMS?

and Action

in a Maya Community

Cambridge University Press

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10679-5 - What are Norms?: A Study of Beliefs and Action in a Maya Community

Francesca M. Cancian

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521106795

© Cambridge University Press 1975

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1975

This digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Catalogue Card Number: 74-77833

ISBN 978-0-521-20536-8 hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-10679-5 paperback

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10679-5 - What are Norms?: A Study of Beliefs and Action in a Maya Community

Francesca M. Cancian

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
<i>Preface</i>	vii
1 INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF NORMS	1
2 STRATEGIES FOR DESCRIBING AND MEASURING NORMS	11
3 RESEARCH SETTING: THE MAYA COMMUNITY OF ZINACANTAN	27
4 THE FRAME-SORTING METHOD FOR DESCRIBING NORMS	37
5 ZINACANTECO NORMS AND THE SOCIAL ORDER	54
6 VERIFYING THE MODEL OF ZINACANTECO NORMS	82
7 THE THEORY OF THE SOCIALIZED ACTOR v. THE EVIDENCE	105
8 DISCONFIRMING EVIDENCE FROM THE ZINACANTAN SURVEY	114
9 SOCIAL IDENTITY: AN ALTERNATIVE THEORETICAL APPROACH	201
 <i>Appendices</i>	
1. <i>Classification of statements elicited by substitution frames, by informant</i>	160
2. <i>Distribution of ratings on Person Perception Interview</i>	162
3. <i>Explanations and attempted remedies for the failure of some of the Nachih interviews</i>	164
4. <i>Association of norms with action</i>	167
5. <i>Intercorrelations of norm scores</i>	170
6. <i>Correlations of norm scores and action, for Apas and Nachih</i>	172
7. <i>Intercorrelations of measures of action and social position</i>	176
8. <i>Normative statements used in sorting tasks, in Tzotzil and English</i>	179
9. <i>English translation of questionnaire</i>	187
<i>References cited</i>	201
<i>Index</i>	209

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10679-5 - What are Norms?: A Study of Beliefs and Action in a Maya Community

Francesca M. Cancian

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

TO FRANK

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10679-5 - What are Norms?: A Study of Beliefs and Action in a Maya Community

Francesca M. Cancian

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

THE QUESTION ‘What are norms?’ can be answered in many ways. In this book, I give three kinds of answers. First, I present a method for describing the norms of a community. Second, I examine the relation between norms and social organization in the Maya community of Zinacantan. Third, I contrast two theoretical approaches to norms and social action: the Parsonian theory of the socialized actor and the social identity approach.

The book is written from the perspective of my current theoretical position, which focuses on how people define social identities, and how these definitions relate to what people do. However, when I began the research that is described in this book, my theoretical orientation was different. The history of this study is also the history of my change from a Parsonian to a ‘social construction of reality’ sociologist.

I began the research, in 1965, as an ambivalent Parsonian. I have always been committed to interpreting society from the actor’s point of view, and Parsons’ theory of the internalization of norms seemed to be the best way to explain social order from this perspective. On the other hand, I had serious doubts about whether people usually act in accordance with what they believe is right – doubts that were based on informal observation and a few studies done by others. However, the negative findings in some of these studies were unconvincing because I did not have confidence in their measures of norms and actions.

For these reasons I decided to do a study in Zinacantan that would carefully measure norms and action and would test some of the implications of Parsonian theory. I had done research in Zinacantan before, and this small, relatively homogeneous community seemed to

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10679-5 - What are Norms?: A Study of Beliefs and Action in a Maya Community

Francesca M. Cancian

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

be a good setting in which to examine whether and how the normative beliefs of individuals affect their actions.

I assumed that norms were culturally specific conceptions of good and bad action. Therefore, before I measured variation in norms I wanted to describe the norms of Zinacantecos and find out what categories of good and bad actions are important to them. No one before had rigorously described the norms of a community from the actor's point of view. However, I was familiar with some new methods for describing native category systems that were being developed by anthropologists in the field of 'ethnoscience.' In addition, I was intrigued with the possibility of using the ethnoscience approach to describe a complex and theoretically important domain like norms.

Therefore, I developed a new method for describing norms and used it to construct a model of the norms of Zinacantecos. The model provided a solid basis for measuring variation in normative beliefs among Zinacantecos.

I decided that the measures of action should focus on activities that are important to Zinacantecos and that are not strongly influenced by a person's wealth. I expected that the effect of an individual's beliefs would be most apparent in this type of situation. Moreover, there had to be sufficient variance in behavior so that I could examine whether individuals with different normative beliefs behaved differently. The three activities that met these criteria best were situations where Zinacantecos had to choose between a modern and a traditional behavior alternative, e.g., going to a Western doctor or to a native curer. Thus I had the opportunity to study modernization, as well as to examine the relation between norms and action.

In 1967, the description of Zinacanteco norms was essentially completed. So I proceeded to conduct a survey of several hundred Zinacantecos to find out how variation in norms related to modern v. traditional behavior. The survey data showed that there was no relationship between an individual's normative beliefs and his actions. The data also indicated that 'being modern' was not a unified concept, since there was little relationship between adopting one modern practice and adopting the others.

At this point, some social psychologists at Cornell introduced me to the vast number of previous studies on attitudes and behavior. Most of these studies had found little relationship between what people do and what people say is right and proper. An extensive re-analysis of my Zinacantan survey data convinced me that my data, also, showed no relation between norms and action.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10679-5 - What are Norms?: A Study of Beliefs and Action in a Maya Community

Francesca M. Cancian

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

ix

When I joined the sociology department at Stanford in 1969, I was in search of a theoretical paradigm that would explain these negative findings and suggest a more fruitful way of thinking about norms and social action. I found the paradigm when I read Peter Berger's work and discussed the 'social construction of reality' approach with some colleagues and students who were committed to that perspective.

The first part of this book has not been greatly affected by my intellectual odyssey. The method for describing norms seems just as valid now as it did when I originally developed it. The analysis of how norms relate to social organization in Zinacantan is not dependent on either theoretical perspective, although some of the more interesting ideas in the analysis did not occur to me until after I had articulated the social identity approach. However, the survey that is described in the second part of the book would be different if I were to design it now. I would expand the survey so that it would provide data to test both the Parsonian and the social identity approach. It would include a different way of conceptualizing and measuring 'variance in norms,' and different criteria for selecting the behavioral alternatives.

The study has been a collective enterprise in many ways. The research in Zinacantan would not have been possible without the Harvard Chiapas Project and the steady, lighthanded support of its director, Evon Z. Vogt. Throughout my field work, I received a great deal of advice, help and support from Frank Cancian, George and Jane Collier and Robert Laughlin. The task of collecting the data depended on the hard work of many Zinacanteco assistants, especially Domingo de la Torre Perez, Jose Hernandez, Guillermo Perez Nuh, Chep Nuh, Romín Perez and Manuel Perez. I am also grateful to the many Zinacantecos who were willing to answer questions and provide the data I needed. I am indebted to the National Science Foundation (GS-1341) for providing the necessary funds.

Interpreting the data and writing this book also depended on the ideas and assistance of many people. Each draft was carefully criticized by Frank Cancian, who both pointed out major flaws and shortcomings, and gave me the encouragement to continue. I also benefited from the comments of Albert Bergesen, Jane Collier, Nancy Donham, Michael Hannan, John Meyer, Stephen Olsen, and Michele and Renato Rosaldo. I developed my conception of the social identity approach in the context of many discussions with John Meyer, and Albert Bergesen also helped me to develop new ways of thinking about norms in society. I received valuable assistance in analyzing the data from Susan Almey, Jane Badger, Bonnie Parke and Pamela Oliver, and

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10679-5 - What are Norms?: A Study of Beliefs and Action in a Maya Community

Francesca M. Cancian

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

x

WHAT ARE NORMS?

the Stanford Committee on Latin American Studies provided some funds for data analysis. Finally, I am indebted to the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, where I wrote the first draft of this book.

Besides this professional help, I was sustained throughout this project by a rich network of personal relationships that I will always treasure. I especially appreciate my fellow field-workers and my friends in San Cristobal and Zinacantan, in particular George and Jane Collier, Bob and Mimi Laughlin, Graciela Alvarado Vda de Villatoro, Domingo de la Torre, and Juan Vasques and his family. My family is in a special category. Frank Cancian is central to my life and my work in many ways – as a loving person, an esteemed colleague, and a worthy opponent. And my children, Maria and Steven, have made the entire enterprise more fun by enjoying our travels and accepting me as I am.

1974

F.M.C.