

Not the norm

MS&E 384: short paper on Social Identity, Norms, and Social Impact readings

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The series of papers for this week's class explore issues of social identity, norms and social impact. Spanning forty-seven years of research, these papers attempt to account for the ways that people affect one another. While the explication of norm development, social impact, group pressure and social identity represented in these papers forms a rich and diverse perspective on what norms mean for individuals, group, and intergroup relationships, there is value in considering what norms about norms these papers also represent. As a method of inquiry, I will explore how each of the papers deal with non-normative behaviors, when people do not perform within the boundaries of behaviors described and measured by these authors. This exploration will reveal additional opportunities to be investigated in the study of social norms, including differentiations between reactive and generative norm formation, the role of agency in identity formation and subsequent instantiations of agency such as code switching behaviors and fluid identities within and between groups.

In first paper in the series, "Effects of group pressure on the modification and distortion of judgments," Asch (1953), describes a series of experiments that investigate the role of group pressure on individuals' independence and submission behaviors. The general finding of this paper is that:

Independence and yielding are a joint function of the following major factors: (a) The character of the stimulus situation... (b) The character of the group forces [especially unanimity and size]... (c) The character of the individual. (p. 161, Asch)

Asch discovers significant individual differences in his study of group pressure. Not all subjects respond to manufactured social pressure in the same manner. He attributes these variations in response to subjects' levels of confidence, principles, task commitment, malleability of

perception, malleability of judgment, and tolerance for difference between self and others. Asch assumes that subject “behavior under experimental social pressure is significantly related to certain basic, relatively permanent characteristics of the individual”(p. 156, Asch). This assertion is based on the study finding that manipulating the dynamics of the group does not impact a particular population’s willingness to submit to group pressure. However, as the studies are not a within-subjects design, the effects of experimental manipulations on particular subjects cannot be absolutely confirmed. The implication of the assertion of fixed characteristics is that responses to group pressure are innate and unchanging for a segment of the population. What this may overlook is the notion of subjective agency on the part of these participants and their potential ability to strategically embody various positions between perceived submissive and independent action based on superordinate motivations.

In the paper “The Psychology of Social Impact,” Lantané (1981) proposes a model of social impact based on the premise that “increases in the strength, immediacy, and number of people who are the source of influence should lead to increases in their effect on an individual” (p. 345, Lantané) Expressed as a mathematical formula, this theory identifies the significant variables that determine if people will be influenced by social groups. From this work, it can be inferred that people who do not respond to social forces do not experience the variables defined. For example, it may be that the students in the journalism study did not differentiate between the status of professors and secretaries when determining which news stories were worthy of more column inches, but hypothetically they may have differentiated on other strength factors such as celebrity.

Lantané’s work introduces a limited model of context effects tied primarily to the status characteristics and number of people involved and the temporal immediacy of the interaction.

Latané's broad application of his theory to situations as diverse as helping behaviors in elevators and crowding of rats in cages suggests that contextual variables outside of his theory have a minimum causal impact on people's responses to social forces. However, in the studies cited that investigate the impact of group size on behavior, the maximum population affected is not greater than 50%.

This limit is also found in Cialdini, Reno and Kallgren's (1990) account of how people are affected by perceived descriptive and injunctive norms. In both papers, the authors consider how experimental manipulations influence the behavior of the aggregate population, but do not account for the portion of subjects that remain unaffected. The maximum proportion of subjects affected in the in Cialdini et al.'s studies is 54%, in the case of littering in a pro-littering norm/littered environment when subjects have seen a confederate litter. While Cialdini et al. account for circumstances in which people are more likely to be influenced by descriptive and injunctive norms, with the exception of noting gender effects, they do not attempt to account for the significant portion of the population that is not influenced by their manipulations. By not accounting for the portion of the population that is not influenced by experimental manipulations, the authors are unable to tell a complete story of the phenomena they seek to describe.

In contrast, Bettenhausen and Murnighan (1985) place students in explicit groupings in order to document the behavior that emerges from asking these groupings to engage in decision-making tasks. The authors consider the role that members' previous experiences play in developing interaction norms in these new groups. Interaction patterns emerge based on the similarities between members understanding of the new situation and the similarities between members previous experiences encapsulated in individual's group interaction scripts.

Mismatches between members on these dimensions leads to groups needing to establish new shared understandings of the situation and new shared interaction scripts. Depending on when mismatches occur in the group process, the authors find different levels of conflict and shared understanding. Interestingly, these mismatches are described as threats— “when the group’s recent agreement or current proposals fall outside what at least one member considers to be appropriate and that person is sufficiently motivated to act” (p. 356, Bettenhausen & Murnighan). The motivation to make adjustments to the group’s procedures is categorized as a threat, but the authors are unclear why the use of the term threat, “an expression of intention to inflict evil, injury, or damage” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary), is considered appropriate terminology. Without reading too much into this terminology, it is noteworthy that the exercise of threatening behaviors within the groups is a key component of the framework which accounts for group variation and the uniqueness of norms between groups. Unlike in the two previous papers, where potential “threats” were not accounted for, in this study accounting for the behavior of all individuals lead to a wide variety of group outcomes.

Exploring the concept of group membership through the lens of social identity and self-categorization, Hogg and Terry (1981) look at the social influences on individuals in a manner most similar to Asche. However, while Asche identified individual’s specific characteristics as accountable for variation in subject behavior, Hogg and Terry take a broader perspective of individuals’ characteristics by ascribing specific membership motivations to individual’s social behavior.

The authors propose that participation in groups is attributed to individuals operating from two social orientations. In the first orientation, the uncertainty reduction hypothesis contends that that:

...social identity processes are...motivated by a need to reduce subjective uncertainty about one's perceptions, attitudes, feelings, and behaviors and ultimately, one's self-concept and place within the social world. Uncertainty reduction, particularly about subjectively important matters that are generally self-conceptually relevant, is a core human motivation. Certainty renders existence meaningful and confers confidence in how to behave and what to expect from the physical and social environment within which one finds oneself (p. 124, Hogg & Terry).

The second orientation is based on self-enhancement motives, where people seek group membership in order to cultivate positive self-esteem "through positive intergroup distinctiveness (p. 124, *ibid*). In both of these cases, individuals are motivated to participate in groups from a position of dearth of self-esteem and certainty. The challenge of framing group membership from this deficit perspective is that dominant notions of both individuality and group participation are embedded in this perspective.

A useful analog to facilitate considering how a deficit perspective might influence our understanding of norms and social behavior, is the example of how two perspectives on the state in which children enter the world has impacted child rearing methods. Historically, children of western countries have been born into the world, perceived as blank slates, *tabula rasa*, or vessels of original sin. The first perspective leads to a belief that children are open to having knowledge poured into them, and the second perspective leads to the belief that children must be emptied of sin through strict and early discipline. In neither case, is the child afforded agency as active participants in their culture or as constructors of knowledge.

In the same manner, the deficit orientation advanced by Hogg and Terry simplifies the formation of groups to be without generative agency, to rely primarily on reactive situations where people join together to overcome a dearth of esteem and opportunity. To follow this logic to a possible conclusion— is it possible that those with esteem and opportunity are uniquely isolated, with no interest in group membership?

Instead of proposing this extreme position, I would instead argue that the deficit model introduced by Hogg and Terry is reflective of crucial aspects of American culture. As a highly mobile society shaped by the industrial revolution and Taylorism's approach to scientific management, exemplified in both industry and schools, it is not surprising that the need for self-enhancement and resolution of social identity are highly motivating forces for group formation. Through modernization, work, family and culture environment provide fewer resources to avoid the emergence of these deficits. However, it is short sighted to accept the norm of norm formation to be reliant on only the most salient challenges faced by individuals.

In an argument for investigating phenomena that may account for the 50% of people not affected by the experimental manipulations described above, it is valuable to consider groups and cultures where "negative outliers" are first not identified as such and secondly not rejected as "deviants" (p.127, Hogg & Terry). It is valuable to consider if there are conditions where belonging to a group is not made salient solely through the amplification of in-group and out-group differences, and where positive forms of agency leads to the strategic construction of multiple social identities.

One example that foreshadows a possible site for these sorts of investigations is code-switching behavior. Code-switching, when applied to immigrant and minority culture k-12 students, refers to the ability of students to traverse social and cultural environments through conscious choices regarding presentation and representation of self. Language, style-choices, expressed values, and other aspects of identity may be shifted from one environment to the next, not in response to a deficit of identity or lack of self-esteem, but rather as an agentic choice to best utilize the resources available in each environment. In this manner, students are able to strategically determine what expressions of social identity to bring into salience.

When Asch describes the category of subjects that go along with the group, even when they consciously know that the group is factually wrong, he describes their reasoning as follows: “They yield because of an overmastering need not to appear different from or inferior to others, because of an inability to tolerate the appearance of defectiveness in the eyes of the group” (p. 156, Asch). Hogg and Terry would certainly recognize this group as aligning with their theories of group membership. However, Asch goes on to qualify this categorization, stating that the category descriptions “are descriptive and do not presume to explain why a given individual responded in one way rather than another (p. 156, *ibid.*). Does this qualification provide a broad enough window to consider more deeply that these subjects may have engaged in an active choice to go along with the group and that perhaps others in the cognitive distortion categories also made choices to go along with the group? The potential for subjects to engage in forms of agency that ultimately satisfy their goals and interests above those of the experimenters is not explored in this paper. It may have not been explored because it did not happen, or was it that such agency was not salient to the researcher? Answering this question for all of the papers referenced is a worthy endeavor. Relevant findings may provide a way to consider more broadly the existence of and opportunities for generative groupings that do not rely primarily on deficit identities as a basis for social membership.

References:

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