
UNIT 24 NORMS

Structure

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24.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- describe the characteristics of norms;
- discuss the different types of norms;
- analyse the role played by norms in the integration of society;
- describe the diversity of norms in different cultures; and
- list the function of norms in socialisation and social control.

24.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit you are going to learn about the nature of social norms. The ways in which social norms are changing and the differences between the various types of norms. Here the diversity of norms in different cultures has been discussed. You will also learn about the function of norms in the process of socialisation and social control. The unit discusses the problem of deviance and anomie in society.

24.2 THE NATURE OF SOCIAL NORMS

the use of “norms” as a technical term in the social sciences is rather new. This is shown by the fact that the 1930 edition of the **Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences**

did not even include this term. The word “norm” is derived from the Latin “**norms**”, which is a carpenter’s square or rule.

Social norms are standards of behaviour shared by the members of a social group, to which they are expected to conform. Norms refer to accepted and required behaviour for a person or a group in a particular setting. They are rules for social living.

No social structure can survive without social norms; for social structure is made up of patterned social behaviour, and unless the behaviour of people is regulated by a vast variety of prescriptive and prohibitive norms, human society is bound to be thrown into unthinkable chaos.

24.2.1 Changing Nature of Social Norms

Unlike physical reality, human society is sustained by laws that are normative. While the laws of the physical world operate by themselves and are not disobeyed, the norms of various kinds which regulate social relationships, and ultimately the social structure, can be violated and also changed.

Social norms are standards of a group for controlling the conduct of its members in relation to each other and to the community as a whole. Norms are both prescriptive and prohibitive. In other words, norms require people to do certain things, and forbid them from doing certain other things.

Norms surely regulate the conduct of people, but it does not mean that this is necessarily achieved through physical coercion. As we shall see, there are numerous kinds of norms and the mechanisms of punishment and reward through which they control behaviour vary considerably. It may be mentioned, however, that physical coercion is not really required in most of the cases, because the members of a group usually take for granted the norms upheld by the group and do not consider it proper to deviate from them.

Activity 1

List two norms and two values which are part of your society and culture. Write a note of one page on “Values and Norms : Nature and Distinction”. Share your answer with other students at your Study Centre and also discuss it with your Academic Counsellor in your counselling session, if possible.

24.2.2 Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft Norms

Not all the norms of a society are written down. In fact many of them are not even specifically spelt out. For example, the rich variety of customs and manners which govern the behaviour of various members of a joint-family towards each other are not coded or written down. We learn them by watching the behaviour of our elders from ever since our childhood. The same is more or less true of other familistic or primary groups. On the other hand, the norms of the contractual and secondary groups or associations are more formally laid down. Often the norms or rules which regulate the associations are written down. On the basis of this difference, Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft norms have been distinguished. According to Earl Bell (1961), the action norms which belong to the Gesellschaft category are both rational and efficient where the achievement of goals in society is concerned. Only the efficiency of achieving one’s aims counts in this sphere. Whereas, in Gemeinschaft category the society or community will follow the traditional ways and habits of doing things even though they may not achieve results. In spite of the evidences which show the

inefficiency of their methods and procedures, the people keep on following their old ways.

However, Bell believes that in Gemeinschaft organisation or systems, it is very difficult to measure the efficiency of the action norms because they are multipurpose. They are more geared towards the satisfaction of the needs of the members rather than towards attaining specific goals or ends.

24.2.3 Discord in Norms

Norms are based on values. They prescribe through relatively specific rules what is considered to be good or desirable by the society as a whole, or by a particular group. There is a diversity of norms belonging to various groups, and these sometimes come in variance with each other. For instance, the norms of the family and the broader kin-group require that one should help his or her kinsmen in every way.

If someone holds a position of power in a government or some other organisation, he/she is expected to help and provide employment to his or her kinsmen but the norms of the organisation require a person to select the most efficient candidate. This is only one example of discord in norms. They arise not only in the norms of different groups, but also between various norms of the same group. These disagreements are sought to be reconciled with reference to values which are considered higher and are more generally accepted. Norms themselves are ordered as higher or lower in terms of the more general and fundamental values.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: a) Use the space below for your answers.

b) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) What are social norms? Explain in about five lines.

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2) Tick the correct answer.

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|-------|--|-----|----|
| vi) | Social norms are crucial to the survival of any social structure. | Yes | No |
| vii) | Physical coercion is often required to make people follow the social norms of their society. | Yes | No |
| viii) | All the norms of a society are written and coded. | Yes | No |
| ix) | The norms which are contractual and formally laid out are called Gemeinschaft norms. | Yes | No |

24.3 ASPECTS OF NORMS

There are many concepts which are close to the concept of norm, or can be looked upon as its types. For a clear understanding of social norms it is necessary to be

familiar with various terms and concepts that are related to the concept of norm, and are frequently employed in sociological literature. Among these, “folkways” and “mores” are used more or less as equivalents of social norms. There are other widely employed terms such as manners, fashions, customs, institutions, and laws that represent norms of different types that are supported by various kinds of sanctions of reward and punishment which go with each of them. In order to be conversant with the whole array of social norms we must be clear about these also.

24.3.1 Folkways and Mores: Kindred Concepts

It was W.G. Sumner who made popular these concepts through his book *Folkways* which was first published in 1906. The term folkways is so broad that it encompasses all kinds of social usages and social codes. According to Sumner (1906) folkways often “are like products of natural forces which men unconsciously set in operation”, and “are developed out of experience”. He again points out that folkways are “handed down by tradition and admit of no exception or variation, yet change to meet new conditions. From this results that all the life of human beings, in all ages and stages of culture, is primarily controlled by a vast mass of folkways. : Now, we look at the relations and distinctions between folkways and mores.

i) Relations between folkways and mores

Mores are those folkways which are viewed *as regulators* of the society. Thus “folkways” is a wider concept, and those folkways which are considered to be important for the sustenance of the society are “mores”. In this sense mores are a kind of folkways, which are more binding than the latter.

ii) Distinctions between folkways and mores

However, some writers treat folkways and mores as separate categories. For example, Kimball Young and Raymond Mack (1972) observe that in Sumner’s own work the concept of folkways is employed in a general sense while mores are defined as a particular kind of folkways but it would help clarity of thought if the two are distinguished. Young & Mack (1972) have drawn a distinction between folkways and mores. They say that folkways are more general in comparison to mores; while mores are folkways which have been given greater importance by the society. To have a clear conceptual idea about them, it is essential to treat the less important or significant norms as folkways and more crucial norms as mores. The violation of folkways is lightly judged while the violation of the morally judged norms or mores is punished severely.

In comparison to Young & Mack, Broom and Selznick (1963 : 69) believe that the intensity of feelings and the procedure for enforcing them distinguishes the folkways from the mores. They say that in the scale of norms, the mores find their place at the top and the folkways at the bottom. The folkways concerned with such things as dress, fashion, table manners, etc., do not evoke much emotion. If somebody wears the wrong clothes at a formal occasion, at the most that person will be asked to leave or will be ridiculed. However, the dress or uniform of such positions as the clergy, the military etc., are different since they are not merely clothes. They are badges of membership and rank which cannot be substituted by other clothes, as in the case of civilians. These authors maintain that though folkways are considered to be right proper and rational, objectively they may not be rational.

Koller and Couse (1965 : 665) also treat folkways and mores as distinct concepts. To them folkways are “customary ways of doing things, but they are not vital to a

society's well being. Consequently, an individual who fails to conform to a folkway usually suffers only a mild disapproval". Mores on the other hand, are viewed as "essential to a society's well being. Consequently, they are strictly enforced".

However, there is much to be said in favour of regarding "folkways" as the broad category of which mores are the more effective manifestation. The difference between them is only that of degree; for, all folkways regulate socio-cultural life in some way, to a greater or a lesser extent.

24.3.2 Types of Norms

Customs, fashions, institutions (in the sense of established procedures) and laws embody different types of social norms. Different types of norms are upheld by their particular kinds of sanctions - that is ways of punishment and reward. In fact, the nature of social sanctions that go with various kinds of norms are good indicators of the types of norms.

i) Customs as Norms

The primary sanction against the violation of the norms of custom is social disapproval. Deviation from the norms of prevailing fashions is prevented or minimised through the fear of ridicule or contempt. And institutions (such as marriage) are procedures which are established so strongly that they become necessary conditions of behaviour. Law or legal norms have the power of the state behind them. The violation of law or legal norms, is punished through fine, imprisonment and even with death penalty.

Customs regulate most of our day-to-day behaviour. They underlie the more formal order of legal and institutional norms. Customs are socially accredited ways of action. They are so deeply rooted in the way of life of a society, that people conform to them almost by force of habit, without being conscious about it. Customs are seldom coded or written down by the people who are governed by them. They are group procedures that emerge gradually. They are not enacted by any established authority. They are spontaneous and yet they are perhaps the most pervasive and effective of all social norms.

ii) Fashion as Norms

While customs hold sway in traditional societies, modern societies are marked by the rise of fashions. Fashion is a term which applies to a wide variety of aspects of life as opinions, beliefs, recreation, dress, jewellery, furnishing, architecture, etc. It is according to Maclver and Page (1949 : 181) "the socially approved sequence of variation on a customary theme". They see fashions changing in a cyclical way with time. Fashions are cultural factors which are not very much concerned with the basic values of society, although they do not go beyond the customs. They rather supplement the customs of the society.

A fashion which is the latest, tends to be the most preferred, even when it may be ugly or uncomfortable. On the other hand, the older a custom is believed to be, stronger is its grip on the people, even though it may be unjust or repressive. It appears thus that a major difference between traditional and modern societies is that while the traditional societies tend to value whatever is old, modern societies tend to place a value on whatever is new.

Activity 2

Interview a person from your Grandparents generation, one from your parents and one from your own generation on the style of dress worn during their times. Ask them to draw the shape and designs which were fashionable then, today and during your parents' generation and the latest style worn by today's teenagers. Do you think fashion is linear, cyclical or haphazard. Discuss your findings with other students at your study centre.



Changing Fashions and Dress Styles

iii) Institutions as Social Norms

The term institutions has been employed in various ways. Some sociologists use it in such a broad sense that it includes almost anything that is socially established. Maclver (1949 : 15), however, has defined institution in a narrower sense. According to him, institutions are “established forms or conditions of procedure characteristic of group activity”. In this sense institutions too constitute social norms. These social norms are so compelling that they become the necessary conditions of behaviour. Institutions embody more social recognition and compulsion than customs.

iv) Legal Norms

As mentioned already legal norms have the power of the state behind them. In modern society the state alone wields the ultimate sanction of physical enforcement through imposition or threat of imposition of fine, imprisonment, or death. Laws are often derived from customs, but norms become a part of law only when they are upheld by the state.

24.3.3 Integration and Conflict of Norms

In stable societies, even though there are diverse kinds of social norms, these are ordered and integrated through values which are unanimously accepted by almost everyone. In no society there is complete conformity to norms by all the people. But in stable traditional societies, there tends to be a high degree of unanimity about

basic values and the propriety of social norms that they underline. Yet, even in such societies, conflict between various norms is not totally absent.

However, in modern complex societies which are marked by unprecedented social differentiation and a fast rate of social change, conflict of norms reaches new heights. Such societies tend to have subgroups whose particular norms violate the norms of the larger social system. For example, there are criminal subcultures. There is also deviance which does not necessarily come within the perview of criminality. These lead to deviant subcultures.

A high pace of social change also tends to enhance the conflict of norms, and deviance. When values are changing fast, it is difficult to judge what is right and what is wrong. The simultaneous existence of diverse systems of values and norms weakens the spirit of conformity because of rapid social change as well as vastly increasing contact between different cultures and ethnic groups. When people know only one set of values and norms, they tend to adhere to them steadfastly. But when they are aware of numerous alternative values and norms, they no more consider any of these as sacred and inviolable. Prime example of role conflict experienced is by women in contemporary urban life. Women as mothers, as wives, as working women, as daughters and daughters-in-law experience role conflict in their everyday lives since the values attached to each role they perform tend to conflict with each other. Even men in today's society face role conflict since traditional male superiority expected from them may conflict with their modern value of treating their women as their equals.

24.3.4 Diversity of Norms in Different Cultures

Innumerable variations are found in the norms of different cultures. Sociological and anthropological literature is replete with illustrative material regarding the variety of norms in different societies, and different strata of the same society. The variety in norms is so large that it would be difficult even to classify them.

As Maclver and Page (1949 : 20-21) point out, that there are very few universally prohibited behaviours in society, exception being the taboo on mother-son incest. There are wide variations in cultural practices. In some societies we find people covering their heads to show respect, in others uncovering. Some people prohibit marriage within their community while others prohibit outside the community. In some societies a strict sex code exists for the married but not the unmarried, while in others the strictness applies to the unmarried but not the married. Thus, we see that a great variation in the crucial norms exists from one society to another, from one social group to another. Maclver and Page, therefore, warn the student of sociology that to be scientific in our investigations we must develop an unbiased approach to the study of other cultural systems.

Even in the face of such wide diversity of social norms, ethnocentrism is far from non-existent. Wide variation in the norms of different societies underscores the need of viewing social phenomenon in relation to their cultural setting. However, there is often a tendency to evaluate the ways of other people in terms of our own norms. This is ethnocentrism. Much of the prevailing social science itself seems to suffer from deep western ethnocentrism.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: a) Use the space below for your answers.

b) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) Describe the nature of folkways. Use about five lines.

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2) Give an example of folkway and mores of society to make a distinction between the two. Use about six lines.

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3) Tick the correct answer.

- i) While customs and institutions are social norms the fashions are not. Yes No
- ii) People conform to the customs of their society because otherwise they will have problems with the police. Yes No
- iii) Customs are seldom coded or written down by the people who are governed by them. Yes No
- iv) Marriage is an institution found in most societies. Yes No

24.4 THE FUNCTION OF NORMS IN SOCIALISATION AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Socialisation refers to the processes through which human infants develop into social beings. Socialisation inevitably involves the internalisation of the social norms of the group to which the individual belongs. In other word, social norms become a part of the personality of the individual through the process of socialisation.

Thus an adequately socialised individual does not look upon social norms of his or her community as outside objects that hinder him or her. On the other hand one believes them to be right and proper, and tends even to think that one is acting according to the dictates of one’s own conscience when one conforms to the norms and values of one’s society.

By social control we mean the way in which the social order is organised and sustained. In the process of social control, norms play the most crucial part for it is norms that regulate social behaviour. And without such regulation no stable patterning of social relationship is possible. Thus social groups; which embody distinctive patterns of social relationships, cannot survive. The maintenance of social organisation is unthinkable without the operation of norms.

24.4.1 Deviance

Norms provide the standards for the control of behaviour of individuals towards each other, and in relation to various groups and the community as a whole. This does not mean, however, that there is absolute conformity to social norms by all the members of a society at any time. Deviance from norms does exist, and there are a variety of reasons for deviance which merit serious study in terms of general theory and also with reference to particular societies. Such study would inevitably imply better understanding of the nature and functioning of social norms.

24.4.2 Anomie

Anomie literally means the lack of norms or normlessness. But the situation of complete normlessness seldom exists. Sometimes there is lack of clarity about norms. But the term anomie is more frequently used to indicate ambivalent orientation towards norms. R.K. Merton has explained anomie in terms of the gap between culturally defined goals and the legitimate means to reach them.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: a) Use the space below for your answers.

b) Check your answer with the one given at the end of this unit.

1) How does a person conform to the social norms of his/her society. Describe in about five lines.

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2) What is anomie? How does R.K. Merton describe anomie? Use about two lines.

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3) Tick the correct answer.

- i) When social change occurs very fast, it leads to change of values at a fast pace giving rise to conflict of norms Yes No
- ii) Norms of all societies are the same. Yes No

24.5 LET US SUM UP

You have learnt in this unit about the nature of social norms. You have also learnt about the kindred concepts and types of norms like the folkways and mores. Integration and conflicts of norms have also been explained. In this unit the function of norms in the process of socialisation and social control has been discussed. We have described the problem of deviance and anomie in society. Finally, diversity of norms in different cultures has also been discussed.

24.6 KEY WORDS

Ethnocentrism	: The attitude that one's own group is superior.
Fundamental	: Anything which forms the basis or the crux of a system or organisation.
Gemeinschaft	: Strong reciprocal bonds or sentiment and kinship within a common tradition.
Gesellschaft	: Impersonally contracted association between persons.
Kindred	: Any concept which is related to the given concept or similar to it.
Oppressive	: Any custom which is coercive in nature.
Penalties	: Disadvantages imposed on a person or persons for breaking any rule or norm.
Prohibitive Norms	: Any norm which stops a person from doing some thing. For example, touching one's husband's elder brother, in some parts of India is prohibited.
Regulate	: An action which leads to establishment of order.
Sanction	: Approval given to an action etc., by custom or tradition.

24.7 FURTHER READINGS

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Young, Kimball and Raymond, W. Mack, 1972. *Systematic Sociology : Text and Readings*. Affiliated East-West Press : New Delhi.

24.8 MODEL ANSWER TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) Social norms are standards of behaviour shared by the members of a social group, to which they are expected to conform. The word "norm" is derived from the Latin "**norma**" which is a carpenter's square or rule. Thus, social norms refer to accepted and required behaviour for a person or a group in a particular setting. They are rules for social living.
- 2)
 - i) Yes (See section 24.2)
 - ii) No (See section 24.2.1)

iii) No (See section 24.2.2)

iv) No (See section 24.2.2)

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Folkways are described as products of natural forces which people unconsciously set in operation. These products of natural forces reach a final form of maximum adaptation to an interest which is then handed down from one generation to another by tradition. These folkways do not vary much from one period to another. Yet, they do shape themselves to meet new conditions within a certain limit.
- 2) In India to touch the feet of one's elders is a folkway but if a person refuses to do that, he or she is not thrown out of the community. One of the mores of Hindu society is not to eat beef and even now if a Hindu in a village eats beef, he will be excommunicated from his community. Therefore, to refuse to conform to a folkway is easy but to refuse to conform to a mores of one's society is very difficult.
- 3)
 - i) No (See section 24.3.2)
 - ii) No
 - iii) Yes (See section 24.3.2)
 - iv) Yes (See section 24.3.2)

Check Your Progress 3

- 1) A person conforms to the social norms of his or her society through the process of internalisation of these norms. This internalisation takes place through the process of socialisation of a person from early childhood to adulthood status. They become part of a person and his or her habit. They are also associated with rewards and punishments according to the nature of the norms.
- 2) Anomie literally means the lack of norms. Merton has described anomie as the gap between culturally required goals and the legitimate means to reach them.
- 3)
 - i) Yes (See section 24.3.3)
 - ii) No (See section 24.3.4)

REFERENCES

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