

# What is a Norm? Why Does it Matter?

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Simply put, a norm is a rule that guides behavior among members of a society or group. [Founding sociologist Émile Durkheim](#) considered norms to be social facts: things which exist in society independent of individuals, and that shape our thoughts and behavior. As such, they have a coercive power over us (Durkheim wrote about this *The Rules of the Sociological Method*). Sociologists consider the force that norms exert both good and bad, but before we get into that, let's make a couple of important distinctions between the norm, normal, and normative.

People often confuse these terms, and with good reason. To sociologists, they are very different things. "Normal" refers to that which *conforms* to norms, so while norms are the rules that guide our behavior, normal is the act of abiding by them. "Normative," however, refers to what we *perceive* as normal, or what we think *should be* normal, regardless of whether it actually is. Normative refers to beliefs that are expressed as directives or value judgments, like, for example, believing that a woman should always sit with her legs crossed because it is "ladylike."

Now, back to norms. While we can understand norms simply as rules that tell us what we should or shouldn't do, there's much more to them that sociologists find interesting and worthy of study. For example, sociological focus is often directed at how norms are disseminated—how we come to learn them. [The process of socialization](#) is guided by norms and taught to us by those around us, including our families, teachers, and authority figures from religion, politics, law, and popular culture. We learn them through spoken and written directive, but also through observing those around us. We do this a lot as children, but we also do it as adults in unfamiliar spaces, among new groups of people, or in places we visit for this time. Learning the norms of any given space or group allows us to function in that setting, and to be accepted (at least to a certain degree) by those present.

As knowledge of how to operate in the world, norms are an important part of the [cultural capital that each of us possesses and embodies](#). They are, in fact, cultural products and are culturally contextual, and they only exist if we realize them in our thought and behavior. For the most part, norms are things that we take for granted and spend little time thinking about, but they become highly visible and conscious when they are broken. The everyday enforcement of them though is mostly unseen. We abide them because we know that they exist and that we will face sanctions if we break them. For example, we know that when we have gathered a variety of items for purchase in a store that we then proceed to a cashier because we must pay for them, and we also know that sometimes we must wait in a line of others who have arrived at the cashier before us. Abiding by these norms, we wait, and then we pay for the goods before leaving with them.

In this mundane, everyday transaction norms of what we do when we need new items and how we acquire them govern our behavior. They operate in our subconscious, and we don't think consciously about them unless they are breached. If a person cuts the line or drops something that makes a mess and does nothing in response, others present might sanction their behavior visually with eye contact and facial expressions, or verbally. This would be a form of social sanction. If, however, a person left a store without paying for the goods they had collected, a legal sanction might ensue with the calling of police, who serve to enforce sanctions when norms that have been coded into law have been violated.

Because they guide our behavior, and when broken, they enlist a reaction that is meant to reaffirm them and their cultural importance, Durkheim viewed norms as the essence of social order. They allow us to live our lives with an understanding of what we can expect from those around us. In many cases they allow us to feel safe and secure, and to operate at ease. Without norms, our world would be in chaos, and we wouldn't know how to navigate it. (This view of norms [derives from Durkheim's functionalist perspective](#).)

But some norms—and the breaking of them—can lead to serious social problems. For example, in the last century heterosexuality has been considered both the norm for humans and normative—expected and desired. Many around the world believe this to be true today, which can have troubling consequences for those [labeled and treated as "deviant"](#) by those who subscribe to this norm. LGBTQ people, historically and still today, face a variety of sanctions for not abiding this norm, including religious (excommunication), social (losing of friends or ties to family members, and exclusion from certain spaces), economic (wage or career penalties), legal (imprisonment or unequal access to rights and resources), medical (classification as psychologically ill), and physical sanctions (assault and murder).

So, in addition to fostering social order and creating the basis for group membership, acceptance, and belonging, norms can also serve to create conflict, and unjust power hierarchies and oppression.