**Introduction to Sociology**

Chapter 6 “Norms”: Assignments with answers

**6.2 What are social norms?**

**Q1**

Describe in your own words what an injunctive norm is, and how such norms differ from a descriptive norm.

Answer:

An injunctive norm expresses what people should do, and deviations from the norm are (possibly) sanctioned. Descriptive norms are expectations about behavior, but in norm-deviance is not sanctioned (unless such norms are also injunctive norms).

**Q2**

What are three types of injunctive norms? Consider your own experiences and come up with one example for each type of norm.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Type of injunctive norm** | **Example** |
| 1 |  |  |
| 2 |  |  |
| 3 |  |  |

Answer:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Type of injunctive norm** | **Example** |
| 1 | Moral: internal norms | You should not eat meat (internalized) |
| 2 | Informal: social norms | You should not take credit for someone else’s work at school |
| 3 | Formal: legal norms | You should not walk on the highway |

**Q3**.

Explain in your own words what a social norm is.

Answer: A social norm is an informal, normative statement specifying what a person should do or not do.

**6.3 Social control theory**

**Q1.**

Define the concepts of “social sanctioning” and “social approval” and explain why these concepts are relevant for social control theory. Make sure to define all concepts you use.

Answer:

Social sanctioning is the process of someone being reprimanded by a third party for not adhering to a norm. Social approval is the rewards and appreciation by other group members for following social norms. These two processes are relevant for social control theory, because this states that social norms are followed because an individual’s behavior either leads to approval or sanctions by third parties, depending on whether it follows or goes against the prevailing social norms.

**Q2.**

How does “monitoring” play a role in social control theory?

Answer:

Monitoring is the extent to which third parties are aware of norm violations. It is proposed that monitoring affects the extent to which social control can be exerted: norms will only be followed if there is a chance that third parties will find out about norm violations. If this is not the case, and the probability of third-party retaliation for norm violations is low, social norms are less likely to be followed. An example of this is swearing in private, compared to swearing in public: in the latter situation, there is monitoring by other people, whereas in the private situation no monitoring occurs. Because of this, the probability of social control is thus very low.

**Q3**

Suppose that a father comes home with a lot of groceries. He has multiple bags to bring inside and tries to carry multiple bags at once. In the process, he drops one. His son, who is at home, decides to help him by picking up the bag and bringing the rest of the groceries inside. Later that night, at the dinner table, the father tells his wife how helpful he was, much to the pleasure of his son.

Q3a. What is the social norm in this example? Why is this a social norm?

Answer:

The norm in this example is helping your parents in and around the house, or more generally: helping someone when they are struggling with something. This is a social norm, because although you may not be morally or legally required to help someone, it is still the informal expectation by others that you do so. Furthermore, third parties may approve or sanction behavior, depending on whether the child adheres to this norm or not.

Q3b. Does social sanctioning or social approval play a role in this example?

Answer:

Social approval plays a role, in the form of complimenting norm-adhering behavior in the presence of other members of the social group.

Q3c. Are the third parties in this example part of the same social group? Or a different group?

Answer:

The third parties are part of the same social group, they are all family members.

**6.4 Internalized norms**

**Q1**

Consider the following situation. A group of five friends want to go to a restaurant. One of them, Elise, is vegetarian. Her four non-vegetarian friends prefer to go to the restaurant ‘Beef paradise’, which, however, does not have vegetarian dishes at all. Elise doesn’t want to go that restaurant, she suggests other restaurants. Her friends don’t want that, and she feels pressured to conform to what her friends want. In the end she joins them, her friends think that’s so cool. Her friends have a great time in ‘Beef paradise’. Afterwards she feels bad about what she did. Which norms play a role here? And in which way?

Answer:

Internalized norms play a role, because Elise prefers not to eat meat. Eventually she does, but then she feels bad about it. This is an internal sanction. An internal sanction is a form of psychological suffering that follow from violating an internalized norm. This may be either feeling shame, guilt, or having a bad conscience as a result of this moral norm violation. In the example, the internal sanction is the feeling of guilt that is experienced because the vegetarian ate something that contained meat. Social norms also play a role, because she feels pressure from her friends to go to a restaurant – and they give her compliments when she conforms to the group norm.

**Q2.**

What is the relation, if any, between social norms and moral norms?

Answer:

If people are frequently exposed to a social norm, they may eventually internalize this norm. While a social norm requires social control to be effective, this is no longer the case when a norm is internalized: in that case, people follow the norm not because violations are punished by third parties, but because they intrinsically feel they should adhere to the norm - internal sanctions (guilt, shame) take over the role of social sanctions. In addition, internalized norms can also become part of people’s preferences, their values.

**6.5 Legal norms**

**Q1.**

What is the main difference between social norms and legal norms?

Answer:

The sanctions that are applied to legal norms are formalized into laws: an individual has certain legal rights and duties, which they should adhere to, lest they be formally sanctioned. In comparison: social norms are ‘informal, unwritten rules’ that have no formal enforcement, and which can ‘only’ be socially sanctioned.

**6.6 Why do norms emerge?**

**Q1**

Explain in your own words the concepts of “cooperation problems” and “coordination problems” and describe how these problems relate to the emergence of injunctive and descriptive norms. Use other relevant key terms from the book in your answer when applicable, and make sure to define any concepts you use in your explanation.

Answer.

Answer should contain and explain *at least* the following terms: social dilemma, coordination problem, cooperation problem. Furthermore, it should describe injunctive norms as a way of solving possible collective problems that arise from individuals acting in their own best interest, rather than the collective’s best interest (cooperation problem), and descriptive norms as a solution to problems that arise from individuals needing to act similarly without sanctions being applied in the case of norm-violation (coordination problem).

**Q2**

Can you give an example of a cooperation problem (not mentioned in the book)? Why is this a cooperation problem?

Answer:

Book: traffic, environmental pollution, littering, working together on assignment, etc.

**Q3**

Consider the following (stylized) fact: doping in professional sports is quite common. Try to depict this outcome as a cooperation problem.

Q3a. Fill in both the happiness (‘payoffs’) and that of others in the table, on a scale from 0 (very unhappy) to 10 (very happy).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Athlete B** | |
|  |  | **Clean** | **Doping** |
| **Athlete A** | **Clean** | , | , |
|  | **Doping** | , | , |

*Note*: entries of each cell of a matrix represent the player’s payoffs, in this case happiness. The first number is the payoff for Athlete A, the second is the payoff of Athlete B.

Answer:

For instance, the payoffs shown below could be considered (any answer that leads to a dominant strategy for taking doping is correct).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Athlete B** | |
|  |  | **Clean** | **Doping** |
| **Athlete A** | **Clean** | 7,7 | 5,8 |
|  | **Doping** | 8,5 | 6,6 |

Q3b. Explain the rationale behind the happiness scores (payoffs), for each of the four outcomes.

Answer:

Suppose Athlete A thinks B will be clean. In that case, using a little doping can help to outperform B, and lead to victory and financial rewards, prestige, etc. Or suppose A thinks B will use doping. In that case, not using any doping will lead to a lost game. So, using doping is a dominant strategy, it’s attractive irrespective of what the others will do. And because A and B reason in this way, the outcome is that both will use doping. That’s not a good outcome, because then athletes suffer from the side effects of doping, while competition starts from where it begun.

Q3c. What could be possible public goods in this scenario?

Answer:

The public good would be healthy citizens, and also fair competition.

Q3d. Which strategy would be an instance of freeriding? Explain why.

Answer:

Using doping while others stay clean.

Q3e. How could norms mitigate free-rider behavior? Can you give an example of such norms?

Answer:

Formal norms / laws may be a solution, i.e. “you should not use doping”, combined with strong formal control (monitoring and sanctioning). Also moral norms may be helpful, e.g., that people internalize that “sports should be fair”.

**Q4**

Can you give an example of a coordination problem (not mentioned in the book)? Why is this a coordination problem?

Answer

Textbook examples are: language use, traffic infrastructure, conventions.

**Q5**

Suppose that a husband and wife have to decide what to do on a Sunday afternoon. The husband prefers to attend a soccer match, while the wife wants to go to a museum. Because they are having a small crisis in their relationship, both agree it is better to do something together rather than each going in another direction.

Q5a. Use the table below to present this situation (for example, take the happiness of husband and wife, on a scale from 0 to 10, for each outcome/cell). Can you predict what the husband and wife will do? If so, why not? Use the concept ‘dominant strategy’.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | Husband | |
| Museum | Soccermatch |
| Wife | Museum |  |  |
| Soccermatch |  |  |

Answer:

Both the husband and the wife do not have a dominant strategy: it is not rational to always go to the museum or always to go to football. The best outcome depends on what the other person is doing. Example:

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | Husband | |
| Museum | Soccermatch |
| Wife | Museum | 10,8 | 5,5 |
| Soccermatch | 4,4 | 8,10 |

b. In what way can norms provide a solution to the issue raised by this situation?

Answer:

Norms can solve coordination problems by providing direction. For example: one week we do what the man likes (football), the next week what the woman wants (museum).

**6.7 Cultural maladaptation and norm change**

**Q1.**

Unpopular norms are argued to be an example of cultural maladaptation. Explain in your own words what these concepts mean, and why this is the case.

Answer:

Unpopular norms are norms that are not the most effective solution to a problem. Cultural maladaptation is the existence of norms and opinions that do not fit well to its social environment. In this sense, unpopular norms are a form of cultural maladaptation because the norms that emerged are not the most suitable solution to a problem: other norms exist that would be a better fit to the social environment.

**Q2.**

A norm that was once adaptive may turn into an unpopular norm after time. One of the possible ways through which this might happen is through cultural inertia. Why might the phenomenon of cultural inertia apply to immigrants?

Answer:

Cultural inertia refers to the time-lag that can exist between changing social conditions and adapting new norms and opinions, which are better suited to the new conditions. When people migrate to a new country, they may be confronted with new social conditions. Their old norms, which may have been useful in their country of origin, may no longer be a good fit to the social conditions in their new host society. It can take time to culturally adjust to new environments.

**Q3.**

Suppose you want to do research into the influence of pluralistic ignorance on the existence of a norm in a certain group. Say that you study college binge drinking, and you think that this is an unpopular norm which only exists because of pluralistic ignorance. Come up with a set of questions you could ask students in this group, which allow you to test whether pluralistic ignorance is the reason that people follow the unpopular norm.

Answer:

At least three type of questions should be asked to students: (1) about their privately supported (drinking) norms, (2) about what they believe others privately support, and (3) about what the student personally does in public. If the majority of students privately rejects binge drinking, but nevertheless does so (binge drinking) in public, because they believe that the majority supports such behavior, then the unpopular norm of binge drinking is due to pluralistic ignorance.

**Q4.**

Under what conditions can pluralistic ignorance evolve into a spiral of silence?

Answer:

Pluralistic ignorance may turn into a spiral of silence especially in cases where expected sanctions for speaking up against a perceived norm are large. In this way, it becomes extremely unattractive to speak up for those who deviate from the majority. And when those who are in the minority position -or at least they think they are- dare not to raise their voice, even more people think that everyone else supports the majority norm.

**Q5**

How do you greed someone? Handshake? Kiss? Bowing? In the textbook, it is mentioned that a greeting convention solves such coordination problem (6.6, p.197), and that it doesn’t matter which convention you use: all are equally good. However, the worldwide covid-19 pandemic has changed the way we greed. A norm that was once adaptive may turn into an unpopular norm after time, because of changing social conditions (6.7). Can you apply this idea to the way people greed each other, and the ‘payoffs’ resulting from the different outcomes? Present your answer in a table comparable to the one presented on p. 197, but now with covid-19 in mind.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | |  | |
|  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |

Answer:

We may argue that handshaking has become unfavorable, because it increases the risk of transmission and infection.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | | Other person | |
| Handshaking | Bowing |
| You | Handshaking | 0,0 | 5,5 |
| Bowing | 5,5 | 10,10 |

**Advanced materials: Online Appendix:**

**Q1.**

The literature behind the emergence of norms incorporates insights from game theory. To further deepen your understanding of these processes, you can practice this online with a so-called ‘trust game’. For this, go to <https://ncase.me/trust/>. This webpage will guide you through multiple chapters, of which only the first few will be discussed here. If this has your interest, feel free to complete the story (approx. 30 minutes) or read the appendix for chapter 6.

Q1a. Play the first chapter, ‘The Game of Trust: One Game’. What is the dominant strategy in this instance? Why is this the dominant strategy?

Answer.

The dominant strategy here is cheat: regardless of what the other person does, cheating gives you the most personal benefits.

Q1b. Now play the second chapter ‘The Game of Trust: Repeated Game’. Multiple characters are introduced here. Against which opponent(s) would freeriding be an option? Explain why.

Answer.

You could freeride against ‘Always Cooperate’. This is because this opponent does not retaliate depending on your behavior: your cheating behavior is not sanctioned by this person.

Q1c. Which form of social control is exerted by the character ‘Grudger’? And which is exerted by ‘Copycat’? Which behavior gets sanctioned? Which of the two characters is more forgiving?

Answer:

The ‘Grudger’ character sanctions norm-violating behavior by making sure that after you violate the cooperation norm, you never stand the chance to gain anything anymore. In doing this, this character permanently sanctions any norm violations. The ‘Copycat’ only sanctions your most recent behavior: by deciding to follow the norms again later on, you can get back into their good graces, and start earning coins again. Because of this, ‘Copycat’ has a more forgiving strategy. For a complete outline of possible strategies, see the appendix for Chapter 6.