

## VALUES, NORMS, AND SOCIAL COGNITION

*In this article I focus mainly on two concepts – values and norms – specifically examining their roles in social cognition. It is a humble effort contributing to a much larger task of understanding their nature and dynamics, the behavior and mental states they generate in groups and individual agents, the intersubjectivity they depend on for effective functioning, and the way they change or sometimes disappear. In the discussion I draw on evidence from several intellectual traditions and their respective methods, including social psychology, sociobiology, evolutionary anthropology, experimental economics, evolutionary psychology, to name just a few. I emphasize the importance of providing an integrated account of what values do and how social norms emerge, why and when we follow them, and the conditions under which we are most likely to focus on relevant cultural normative and axiological ideations. I further examine the existence and evolution of social normativity and its role in the collective welfare.*

**Keywords:** values, norms, social cognition, culture.

Values and norms possess adaptive properties that organize social cognition and facilitate interactions between individuals and groups. In this respect they are connected with the most essential properties of cumulative human culture that coordinate social living and enable meaningful communication within a group. Culture is understood here as an extension of human capacity to organize, store, retrieve and transmit information of collective significance that exceeds the individual memory capacity and an individual's needs for information for personal use. Being a product of collective living and evolution of brain and language (symbolic operations) and grounded in humans' intensive intellectual activity, it results in human capacity for consensual selective self-restraint and serves coordination of social interaction and group survival.

### *On values and norms*

Human societies function on intersubjectively agreed upon ideas about what is valued and what is normative. A value is a durable motivational notion based on experiencing something as good. Values are typically conceptualized as ideations that can form coherently organized systems and exist in a hierarchical form in terms of goal setting<sup>1</sup>. Associations of values enacted in behaviors act as a modal manifestation of a culture. In this sense culture can be thought of as an organized pattern of variation of discourse on what is good; the collective discourse on values.

<sup>1</sup> Here I adhere to Schwartz's conceptualization of values as "desirable, transsituational goals, varying in importance, serving as guiding principle in people's lives" stemming from a long tradition in social psychological research on values [38].

Values are grounded in experiencing something as good, and as such they have an impact on preferences [12; 13]. Culture-specific configurations of values help guide our selection and evaluation of behavior and events [36; 37]. Because they are connected to the evaluation of things as either pleasant or unpleasant, values have motivational or directive force and can set goals and prompt behavior. Given their directive force, learned values interact with the child's developing motivational system during socialization [12]. Matching one's values is intrinsically rewarding, it makes one "feel good/beautiful". In the course of development, values are internalized to become "felt evaluations" [9; 11], in which the learnt value becomes affectively charged and linked to the motivations to enact it [42]. This affective charge is part of what makes values both durable and applicable to many situations. The affective component inherent in experiencing things as good facilitates their internalization. Metaphorically speaking, it shifts our subjective experiences from 'present continuous' ("I am feeling good when I am being admired") to anchoring them in 'present indefinite' ("Recognition is important to me") mode through created *propositional attitudes*<sup>2</sup>. It altogether makes values more durable and surpassing situational application; in many cases it is more legitimate to speak about 'value orientations' than singular 'values'. Values are a kind of 'pattern variables' [29] which makes them akin to norms, to which I now turn.

<sup>2</sup> A propositional attitude is a relational mental state connecting a person to a proposition. They are often assumed to be the simplest components of thought and can express meanings or content that can be true or false [1; 31].

As proposed by D'Andrade (2017), value is an essentializing concept, the formulation of a strong causal force within the human psyche [13]. Norms provide rules describing what a behavior should be like, and values provide criteria by which the behavior is judged as *good* or *bad*. Due to their motivational properties and capacities to affect our behavior and perception of the world, both values and norms have long been a focus of research in social sciences. Both values and norms give meaning to our subjective experiences. Equally important, they contribute to our understanding of the conventions we live by as of *real* constraints, weighing on our lives with all substantiality of an undeniable fact. Such imposition of the norms is facilitated by the nature of human collectivity. The role of the body social in solidification of norms into brick wall-like boundaries between the acceptable (and human) and the unruly, unkempt non-humanity is difficult to overestimate. Throughout the socialization process, the collectivities help us contour for ourselves what is and what is not normal (or socially desirable) and to make our inferences accordingly. Without ever being applied pressure to, we learn what we need to do if we want to remain acceptable members of the collectivity. Norms are easily learned and are traceable in language; evidence of understanding moral principles underlying normative prescriptions ('deontic reasoning') is found in children at an early age [8].

A norm is a notion involving collective procedural knowledge of how behaviors should be framed. Perceived links between norms act as a modal manifestation of culture (provided it is safe to assume that one's own cultural norms and values are viewed as good by default). Norms associate into some prescriptive principle that by homogenizing individuals creates a social world of 'shoulds' by which individuals are bound in some organized groups and structured collectivities.

As aptly pointed out by John Searle, the compelling power of norms arises from the community members' shared collective commitment to reenact them [39]. The works of norms are reflection of our recognition of this commitment which climaxes in the emergence of *institutions* (e.g. money, church, marriage, education etc.) that we endow with *entitativity*, with all the implications that ensue [cf. 13]. Our implicit knowledge of others' understanding of the binding nature of norms informs the social reality we inhabit. Notably, because normative representations have direct and observable behavioral outcomes, it is much more difficult to 'fake' or 'conceal' one's upholding a norm than to fake or hypocritically disguise one's

endorsement of a value. In fact, social norms appear to be so closely linked to their behavioral displays that they are often mistaken for personality traits or values (in real life and in ethnographic literature). By the same token, norm violations are much more obvious, are experienced as more offensive and attract significantly more sanctions when compared to one's 'apostasy' from values [cf. 43; 45].

A phrase such as 'norms affect behavior' may sound self-explanatory and even redundant, and yet it is the capacity of norms to mold conformity, elicit compliance and shape behavior frequencies in cultural groups, which has secured them close attention of social psychologists and sociologists for several decades [7, for review]. A norm is a construct that helps describe and explain human behavior; a norm cannot be dissociated from successfully eliciting corresponding behavior, to deserve the word<sup>3</sup>. Involved in mechanisms of social control, norms have a great potential for formatting behavior and setting boundaries, and as such they are conceptualized as intrinsically social phenomena. No matter how bizarre a culture's normative prescriptions might be, they command obedience within the cultural community where this norm is a currency.

In *The Grammar of Society*, Cristina Bicchieri examines social norms, such as fairness, cooperation, and reciprocity, seeking to understand their evolved nature and purpose [2]. Examining the existence and survival of inefficient norms, she demonstrates how norms evolve in ways that depend on the psychological dispositions of the individual and how such dispositions may impair collective welfare. By contrast, she also shows how certain psychological propensities may naturally lead individuals to evolve fairness norms that closely resemble those we follow in modern societies [2].

Perceived consensus on what the norms are is an important component of their functioning. The practical implications of this observation can be more fully appreciated by considering the cases of misperceived consensus: mistaken consensus seems to be promoting behaviors erroneously viewed as normative with equal success as 'true' consensus is [28; 30]. Norms emerge in and regulate relationships. Normative situations involve interactions of multiple agents, their mutual perception and their resulting normatively regulated behaviors. In the center of the literature on norms – perception – behavior juncture is the notion of a *descriptive*

<sup>3</sup> It is not to assume that knowledge of a norm will necessarily elicit corresponding behavior in all relevant cases. Here I limit myself to a schematic situation and not take into account various degrees of cultural competence and internalization [42].

*norm*. Descriptive norms are derived from what other people do in any given situation. The cognitive construct of a descriptive norm refers to personally held cognitions about consensually endorsed behaviors and has been studied by social psychologists for a long time [7, for review]. The evidence coming both from field and laboratory research shows that descriptive norms, by evoking group consensus surrounding the norm, can affect accessibility of related cognitions (e.g. in stereotype activation) and behavioral intentions [33; 40; 41 for review]. In cross-cultural research, similar evidence is found for identification with salient elements of cultural worldviews [44] and for cultural frame switching in bicultural individuals [46]. Norm perceptions have been pointed to as causal forces driving cultural differences by Matsumoto [27].

Interestingly, in addition to directly influencing behavior, norms have ways of affecting human neurophysiology. It suggests an entirely new set of causal connections that greatly enriches and complexifies the picture with respect to the evolutionary role of norms in consolidation of cultural traits. The available literature points to the capacity of norms to mediate human behavior and physical conditions (by arousing negative emotional states, affecting stress-related hormones when norm violations are witnessed [cf. 32]. Strong negative affect (often reducible to emotion close to disgust) and feelings analogous to physical pain – both markers of biological determinants of adaptation [35] – accompany one's experience of suffering norm violations. Furthermore, one's failure to match cultural standards has been empirically shown by William Dressler to have negative effects on physical and mental health in several American and Brazilian samples [15; 16]. As there is hardly any cultural behavior that is not governed by norms, the pressures of normative prescriptions are quite potent at any point in individual life trajectory. As such, norms should indeed be treated as powerful factors in social research involving human behavior and interactions. Not surprisingly, gaining a better understanding of the impact that normative pressures have on the biological aspect of human life, and its implications for the evolutionary history of norms is one of the most intriguing lines of current research on norms. Despite this interest, very little has been done towards reconstructing the origins of norms and explanation of the mechanisms of their transmission. The evolution of norms still remains a largely unexplored domain, including the dynamics of this process, purpose and conditions under which the norms arose, how the social norms emerged and what some of the evolutionary

'neighbors' of norms were. These are some of the issues we should find out more about.

#### *Values and norms as individual and collective level constructs*

Social researchers often point to the methodological and theoretical problems affecting the measurement of values in cross-cultural settings. One part of the problem of theorizing cultural processes is that neither culture can be likened to its elements in *summative* sense, nor cultural processes (creating institutions, institutionalizing meanings, socializing roles, associating values with roles etc.) can be predicated as a sum of individual motivations, goals, desires etc. Values and norms are attributes of both individuals and societies, i.e. they describe qualitatively different units. Both individual and *plural* subjects [22] participate in creating values and norms; this double nature is part of their entitativity, defining the way they operate. Nation-level constructs are not logically and empirically constituted the same way as individual-level constructs, as convenient as it would be [4; 5]. Pattern correlation of nation-level indices is not replicated at the individual level. Assumed isomorphism of variables at the individual and collective level leads to committing ecological fallacy. In light of the results of meta-analysis the reassessment of theoretical assumptions in level theory and fine-tuning of methodology are in order. Bond (2002) formulates the future directions as "identifying individual-level constructs whose strength and connections with other constructs should be examined across cultures; linking the strength of these constructs with socialization practices and institutional processes that vary across cultural groups; examining importance of extra-individual factors, such as norms, roles, and aspects of language, in generating social cognitions and behavior; and search for new constructs and theories to explain human behavior" [5]. The relationship between individual and collective level values, and values and norms are domains within social science that need more theoretical elaboration to adequately describe and explain social behavior.

#### *Values and norms in social cognition*

Norms act as 'felt shoulds' and frame behaviors as they 'ought to be'. In this sense norms lie closer to behavior (and they probably interact with activity system directly because of their procedural nature) than values do, and they are more prone to change than values are. The norms gain agency in regulating individual and collective behavior because people have a notion of what it means that something is a

norm. Having motivational properties, norms are efficient because they are shared and collectively agreed upon to be what they are; they are ‘allocated power’ in the same way as in Searle’s conceptualization of institutions – they are socially negotiated; their power derives from the consensus on the collective commitment to enact them [39]. This consensus on conventional norms draws on intersubjectivity existing between individuals in human groups [20]. Indeed, if a cognitive ability to infer intentions and desires of others in daily interactions proved useful and evolved in humans to be a feature that human babies demonstrate very early, it would make sense to expect some strategic social mechanisms framing this mentalizing capacity to – eventually – some collective advantage. D’Andrade in his discussion of norms mentions that it is difficult to unpack or interpret *shouldness* [10]. As far as the form is concerned, a ‘should’ seems to be an autonomous unit of meaning, even if it is not necessarily one word<sup>4</sup>. It is frequently used to describe social reality that behooves us to follow certain rules and meet our conspecifics’ expectations. I would argue, however, that as such normativeness is a non-linguistic or language-independent experience. Although there may be cross-cultural differences in framing social obligations, I believe that ‘shouldness’ is predicated universally.

It is interesting that the norms as (not necessarily or obviously useful) limitations seem to be very characteristic of cultural behavior in its core. For example, there is interesting evidence of arbitrariness and conservation of non-adaptive cultural behaviors related to feeding behaviors in chimpanzee populations. Individuals seem to restrict themselves to an ecological sub-optimal solution that must be maintained by a social norm preventing an individual from testing other more efficient alternatives [3].

The content of norms has an essential overlap with that of values, and this fact is probably responsible for the lack of a good definition of cultural norms. Theoretical literature contains no coherent understanding of what the norms are, why there are so many of them, how they are different from values, what functions they serve and what are the channels through which they affect individuals, why some of them are manipulated or broken and some are not, and why there are norms for breaking norms. I believe that the isomorphism of content of values and norms is most purposeful; i.e. I can

imagine that values and norms jointly work to secure social balance, as both norms and values direct behavior and coordinate self-interest and group-survival, but through different channels. When one is faced with a necessity to make a behavioral choice, one is consulting one’s individual ‘positive reinforcement’ of one’s motivation in values or directed by a ‘negative’, non-reflexive imposition of a norm. Failure to match both norm and values cries about a deviation. Yet there is evidence that values and norms each also have a particular ‘mission’ to them; and have different functions for individual interactions and for collectivities in their construction of collective social reality [17; 22; 26; 39].

Norms are legitimated by values [9; 10; 12]. To extend this point further, in a cultural group, frequency and consistency of a normative behavior can be expected to be reasonably high<sup>5</sup>. Hence, an endorsed norm can be viewed as a modal behavior of a group, and its motivation is easily translatable into psychological features of the members of the group endorsing it.

Values and norms are complex entities residing in the individual mind, in culture, and in collectivities, simultaneously. The overlap of the content of human psyche, culture and society implies isomorphism of realities each of them construct, or at least their fragmental structural intersection [9–11; 39]. To explain its functionality it should be more beneficial to integrate findings from several theories into a wider range framework rather than cultivate unconnected multiple mini-theories. The use of evolutionary theory is one example. It has been shown that there might be species-specific inclinations in the development of cultural domains among primates, i.e. chimpanzees are more manipulation-oriented, orangutans more self-oriented etc. [3]. These proclivities are suggestive of the possible venues through which values and norms might have developed to be what they came to be. By using evolutionary analysis it is also possible to make connections between personality/society areas [25], as many elements of social cognition involve self-appraisals and self-concept that values and norms have bearing on. When a set of behaviors is judged, normativity of behavior comes out as one of the dimensions [24]. The documented prevalence of similarities over differences in values preferences across cultures and the existence of cross-culturally

<sup>4</sup> In different languages there are various ways of expressing the concept of ‘should’; i.e. *jag borde* in Swedish, *мне следует* in Russian, *il me faut* in French, *Ich solle/dürfe* in German. Although not necessarily expressible in one word, the meaning of such grammatical constructions typically emerges from the phrase as a unitary meaning.

<sup>5</sup> It is not asserted here that norms are the same as (normative) behavior, as neither normative behavior nor normative belief cannot be guaranteed to translate into action [2]. This preposition will be discussed more at length elsewhere.

recognizable value types that form a quasi-universal structure on individual level and prototypical value orientations on collective level are all suggestive of the evolved nature of human values [36]. Internalization of a single value provides one with a must-follow scenario for more than one social situation. There are a limited number of values constrained by inherent human needs and goals [34]; the high level of consensus they receive, their transsituational applicability and relation to the countable moral dilemmas individuals need to solve to operate in groups endorse this conclusion [36].

One of the sources of human values is argued to be social constraints and requirement for cooperation in face of factors destructive for the unity and longevity of human groups. It has been shown that cooperation and competition are not mutually exclusive, and humans cannot be reduced to ‘one’ nature; there is no ‘either – or’ solution of human sociality. We need to retheorize both competition and cooperation in ways that move beyond dichotomous thinking, which has already been mentioned earlier [21]. Other-directedness and altruism are at heart of self-transcendence vs. self-enhancement value type; the study of human cooperative strategies has been a research focus of evolutionary psychologists and other social scientists for some time [6; 18; 19]. It is the nature of self-transcendence values type that seems most inviting empirical investigation, to better understand the evolutionary trajectories of both values and social norms [cf. 2].

Although there is a consensus regarding some properties of values in social science [14], yet there is an ontological question whether values are

properties of individuals or groups or something else [23]. It is the locus of the agency of value-charged material and the epistemological status of collective values that is necessary to clarify to satisfaction. Along with exploration of self-transcendence values, addressing these issues seems a rather promising theoretical ambition that could potentially become instrumental to more interdisciplinary discoveries. More research should explicitly address and explore the links between values, normativity, and behavior that have long been rather left assumed than theoretically developed in social sciences.

In conclusion, I would like to return to the methodological and theoretical problems that I have discussed earlier with regard to measuring values material cross-culturally. Not finding substantial evidence of cross-cultural variation in values is indeed counter-intuitive. Yet finding cultural differences in social and psychological phenomena is not the only task of cross-cultural research, and the merit of a study cannot be measured merely in proportion to the amount of cross-cultural differences it has brought to light. By the same token, considering the main purpose of cross-cultural research confirming the generalizability of theories would also be rather limiting. It seems more beneficial that instead of finding culture-bound similarities or differences the results of a project would ask questions about the mechanisms that generate and direct these similarities and differences in the relevant variables across cultures, and thus situates them in social cognition. This new knowledge would be most useful and interesting to the students of culture and human mental life.

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## ЦІННОСТІ, НОРМИ ТА СОЦІАЛЬНЕ МИСЛЕННЯ

У цій публікації я звертаюся переважно до двох концептів – цінностей та норм – і зосереджуюся на поясненні їхньої значущості для еволюції соціального мислення та культури людини, як ми її знаємо. Культура розуміється тут як продовження людської здатності організовувати, зберігати, шукати та передавати інформацію, значущу для соціальної групи, що долає обмеження індивідуальної пам'яті та особистої потреби у знанні. Будучи продуктом колективного способу життя, а також еволюції мозку та мовлення (зокрема здатності до символічних операцій) та завдячуючи інтенсивній розумовій діяльності людини, вона породжує людську здатність до узгодженого самообмеження з боку індивідів – членів групи і слугує координуванню соціальної взаємодії та виживанню групи.

Це лише скромна спроба долучитись до більш широкого дослідницького завдання, що включає зрозуміти їхню природу та динаміку, поведінку та ментальні стани, що вони генерують в індивідуальних агентах та в групах людей, інтерсуб'єктивність, що потрібна їм для функціонування, і як вони змінюються і іноді зникають/виходять із вжитку. У своєму нинішньому розгляді я спираюся на доказову базу різних інтелектуальних традицій та знахідки, здобуті їх відповідними методами, – включаючи соціальну психологію, соціобіологію, еволюційну антропологію, експериментальну економіку, еволюційну психологію тощо. Я наголошую на важливості формулювання єдиного пояснення появи цінностей та соціальних норм, їх впливу в певних сферах та сприянню актуалізації відповідних соціокультурних уявлень. Далі я розглядаю існування та еволюцію соціальної нормативності як такої та роль цього явища в добробуті соціальної групи. У підсумках я наголошую на важливості інтердисциплінарного підходу до вивчення цінностей та норм.

**Ключові слова:** цінності, норми, соціальне мислення, культура.

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