

SOCIAL NORMS

This activity focuses on *social norms*, unwritten rules that guide social behavior. Norms vary from place to place and can evolve over time, and violating them can generate anxiety and sometimes approbation. Here, students discuss the norms that affect their lives, the situations in which they are in effect, the ways in which they are enforced or communicated, and how and why they may have originated. Then, they are encouraged to observe and break minor social norms and report on their experiences. The activity is thus a good introduction to topics in psychology, sociology, and urban/international studies. Setup time is minimal.

PROCEDURE

MATERIALS

- None

PREPARATION

No preparation is necessary, but the facilitator might read about research on social norms before initiating group discussion (see Resources).

INSTRUCTIONS

This activity is a discussion-starter. An effective way to begin is to break a minor social norm before beginning the class, then ask students what they felt and noticed. For example, you might wear something that isn't the standard teacher or facilitator attire, make a point of standing closer to others than you would otherwise, put your feet up on your desk, hum loudly, etc. Even minor social transgressions are often enough to generate stares and discomfort. After a few minutes, ask the class about their reactions. What are they responding to? What specific rule were you breaking, and how and when did they learn about that rule? How might it have originated?

Now that they've experienced a violation of a minor social norm, ask the group for examples of other social norms. Try to elicit details about the rules specifying the forbidden behavior, the context in which it is taboo, and whether the rule applies to all people or only to some groups or under some circumstances. Look for group disagreements, and explore why people may see the same action differently. You could also review research on social norms.

Finally, ask each group member to select a minor social norm and publicly violate it before the next class. Encourage them to be bold, but also to be considerate of others and not take unnecessary risks. Remind them that they don't need to be offensive or rude to generate responses by breaking a social norm; indeed, the most interesting results often happen when the rule seems trivial and yet generates reactions from others. For example, although there is little or no reason to do so, virtually everyone faces the door when riding in an elevator. Experiment with this social norm by asking students to face the back or side walls in a shared elevator. Even this minor social transgression is likely to produce stares and comments. Ask students to note others' reactions as well as their own thoughts and feelings and then report back to the class.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How are social norms communicated and learned? Are some taught explicitly?
- A script is a specific kind of social norm that prescribes how a given social interaction should proceed. For example, the standard restaurant script involves waiting to be seated, allowing the server to explain your choices, requesting certain items rather than getting them yourself, and certain procedures for finishing the meal and paying the bill. What other scripts can you think of? What functions do they serve?
- Why are there social norms? Are they beneficial? If so, who benefits from having them? What is the value to a community or society of having social norms? What would happen if they disappeared?
- Are some social norms harmful? Which ones, and why?
- What social norms guide behavior related to things like sharing, cooperation, and competition? How do those norms differ in different regions or societies?

VARIATIONS

- Try having different groups violate the same minor social norm in different contexts and seeing if responses (both of participants and observers) vary with location. Discuss why the same rule may not apply, or be enforced as strongly, in all areas.

RESOURCES

Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion (revised 2006)

Social norms are one powerful way that we shape the thoughts and behaviors of others, and vice versa. This very readable book by eminent social psychologist Robert Cialdini describes research on many facets on human influence.

Norm (Social)

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norm_%28social%29

Wikipedia's informative overview of research and theory on social norms.



This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 1114781. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

