3.2H: Norms

Learning Objectives

• Explain the origin, reinforcement, and significance of social norms in a society or group

Social norms are the explicit or implicit rules specifying acceptable behaviors within a society or group. They define the expected or acceptable behavior in particular circumstances. Social norms can also be defined as the shared ways of thinking, feeling, desiring, deciding, and acting which are observable in regularly repeated behaviors and are adopted because they are assumed to solve problems.

Social norms are neither static nor universal; they change with respect to time and vary with respect to culture, social classes, and social groups. What is deemed acceptable dress, speech, or behavior in one social group may not be acceptable in another.

Deference to social norms maintains one’s acceptance and popularity within a particular group. Social norms can be enforced formally (e.g., through sanctions) or informally (e.g., through body language and non-verbal communication cues). By ignoring or breaking social norms, one risks facing formal sanctions or quiet disapproval, finding oneself unpopular with or ostracized from a group.
Formal Sanctions: Norms may be enforced through informal sanctions, such as derision, or formal sanctions, such as arrest.

As social beings, individuals learn when and where it is appropriate to say certain things, use certain words, discuss certain topics, or wear certain clothes, and when it is not. Groups may adopt norms in two different ways. One form of norm adoption is the formal method, where norms are written down and formally adopted (e.g., laws, legislation, club rules). Social norms are much more likely to be informal and to emerge gradually (e.g., not wearing socks with sandals).

Social Norms of Personal Space: Students demonstrate social norms of personal space by violating the norms. This type of experiment is called a breaching experiment.

Groups internalize norms by accepting them as reasonable and proper standards for behavior within the group. That said, while it is more likely that a new individual entering a group will adopt the group’s norms, values, and perspectives, newcomers to a group can also change a group’s norms.

Same-Sex Marriage and Social Norms: In most Western countries, norms have prohibited same-sex marriage, but those
norms are now changing.

**Key Points**

- Norms can be defined as the shared ways of thinking, feeling, desiring, deciding, and acting which are observable in regularly repeated behaviours and are adopted because they are assumed to solve problems.
- Social norms are neither static nor universal; they change with respect to time and vary with respect to culture, social classes, and social groups.
- Social norms can be enforced formally (e.g., through sanctions) or informally (e.g., through body language and non-verbal communication cues).
- One form of norm adoption is the formal method, where norms are written down and formally adopted. However, social norms are more likely to be informal and emerge gradually (e.g., not wearing socks with sandals).

**Key Terms**

- **social classes**: Social class (or simply “class”) is a set of concepts in the social sciences and political theory centered on models of social stratification in which people are grouped into a set of hierarchical social categories.
- **social group**: A collection of humans or animals that share certain characteristics, interact with one another, accept expectations and obligations as members of the group, and share a common identity.
- **social norms**: Social norms are described by sociologists as being laws that govern society's behaviors.