

# “We always have a beer after the meeting” How norm, customs, conventions, and the like explain behavior.

There are a vast number of ways of explaining human behavior in the social sciences and in ordinary conversation. One family of accounts seeks to explain behavior using terms like *norms, customs, tradition, convention, and culture*. Despite the ubiquity of these terms, it is not fully clear how these concepts really explain behavior, how they are related, how they differ, and what they contrast with. In this paper I hope to answer such questions.

*Keywords: norm; custom; convention; explanation*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the social sciences and in ordinary conversation people attempt to explain human behavior in a vast number of different ways. Why did a Soninkae villager named Sidi kill a chicken when his brother came to visit? An inquirer might find this action explained to him in moral terms. Sidi did this because he thought it was the right thing to do, and he thought this because this action had features X, Y, and Z. The action might also be explained in terms of Sidi’s rational self-interest. Other people try to explain the roots of the chicken killing with a psychological look at the darker regions of Sidi’s subconscious, while still others look for genetic predispositions toward altruism or toward meat-eating. There are also those who tend to explain such actions in terms of large-scale structural factors that prevent large animals, but not chickens, from being raised in this region. Others might look at the idiosyncratic historical facts that led to Sidi’s keeping chickens. A different explanation from these would be one talking about how the people of Sidi’s group have a *norm* of cooking a chicken when separated relatives get together. This norm-based account bears a family resemblance to a number of other sorts of explanations. We might say, in a similar vein, that Sidi killed the chicken because such an act was a *custom* among his people, or a *tradition*, or a *convention*, or a *rule*, or something prescribed by his *culture*.

Explanations in terms of norms, customs, conventions, culture, and the like are certainly very common ways of accounting for human behavior. But it’s surprisingly unclear how such explanations work. How does an explanation invoking culture differ from an explanation invoking morality or psychology? What is the ontological status of a norm? Is it built into the concept of a custom that one *ought to* follow it? Absolutely yes, says philosopher Margaret Gilbert in her comprehensive work *On Social Facts* (1989, 404). Not necessarily, says philosopher Raimo Tuomela in his also comprehensive work, *The Philosophy of Social Practices* (2002, 94). In this

paper I want to make clearer how these ubiquitous but not altogether understood terms work to explain the behavior they describe.

## 2. THE MYSTERIOUSNESS OF CUSTOM-NORM EXPLANATIONS

It takes little effort to see that it is less than clear how we actually do any explaining with notions like customs, norms, convention, culture, etc. To begin with, it's not obvious what sorts of things these entities are. Are norms regular actions or regular attitudes? Geographers know where to find rivers, but where, exactly, is a norm? We speak of French culture, but is this same sort of thing as corporate culture? (And where does culture in the sense of Mozart and Shakespeare fit in?). What is and isn't covered by these terms is also unclear. *How many* people in a society must approve of a practice before it is a norm? *How long* must people engage in a practice before it is a custom? If each participant is doing a certain activity because it seems like it's the only *rational* option, does that preclude it from being a convention?

I think that most English speakers, if pressed, would admit that they are not really very clear on precisely what these terms refer to and how they should be used. Perhaps this is because these are social science terms. Ordinary language users do sometimes borrow them for use in everyday speech, but perhaps they do so without a full grasp of the precise ways such terms are used in the social sciences. Perhaps we can get clear about what these terms mean by looking at how they are used by social scientists. Here's anthropologist Clifford Geertz's attempt to clarify what culture is in his highly regarded and popular anthropology text, *The Interpretation of Cultures*:

to say that culture consists of socially established structures of meaning in terms of which people do such things as signal conspiracies and join them or perceive insults and answer them, is no more to say that it is a psychological phenomenon, a characteristic of someone's mind, personality, cognitive structure, or whatever, than to say that Tantrism, genetics, the progressive form of the verb, the classification of wines, the Common Law, or the notion of a "conditional curse" (as Westermarck defined the concept of 'ar in terms of which Cohen pressed his claims to damages) is (1973,13).

Readers of Geertz should be forgiven, I think, if they still fail to see how social scientists use the term "culture" to explain behavior after reading that ontological status of culture is similar to the ontological status of Tantrism. If one scans the anthropological literature, one will find other anthropologists giving much clearer characterizations of what culture is. The problem is that many of them differ markedly from one another. When you find a definition that enables you to understand the concept clearly, your confidence is marred by reading another equally authoritative

source giving “culture” a different definition. In the 1950’s anthropologists Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckholm identified 164 different definitions of culture, and subsequent anthropologists have only added more. A similar situation exists in sociology with regards to the definition of “norm.” Looking at how social science practitioners define these terms doesn’t leave them any less unclear.

If social scientists don’t make clear what norms, customs, and culture are, perhaps looking at what philosophers have written can help. Philosophy, after all, is a discipline in which clarifying disputed concepts is a central aim. And there has been no dearth of philosophers discussing these concepts. Surprisingly, however, I find philosophical discussions of norms, customs, and the social world in general, are often less than helpful for understanding how we use these concepts to try to explain behavior. One problem is that much of the most prominent recent philosophical work in the area talks about how the social world works, not in terms of familiar concepts like norms, customs, and culture, but using special new terms-of-art such as “plural subject,” “joint action,” “social action,” and “institutional facts” (see, for example, Gilbert 1989; Searle 1995; Miller 2001; Tuomela 2002). Such specialized notions may well help us better understand social phenomena, but they are of limited use in helping us understand how ordinary folk or social scientists try to use more familiar terms like ‘custom’ to explain social behavior.

Another problem is that when philosophers do examine more familiar notions like norms and rules, many place a special emphasis on trying to explicate what it means to be a norm or rule of *language*. This is unsurprising. Understanding how language works is a central part of philosophy (*the* central part, according to many twentieth century philosophers; see Rorty 1992). Understanding what linguistic norms, rules, and conventions are is surely a major part of understanding language. It’s quite plausible, however, that the norms and rules of *language* function in a special idiosyncratic way. What’s true of language norms and rules of may not be true of *social* norms and rules. Overlapping with this emphasis on language is a special focus on the phenomena of *convention*. This, no doubt, is due to the extensive influence of David Lewis’s masterful 1967 book, *Convention* (which was written, largely, to make sense of the notion of convention in language). The special attention to Lewis’s views, of course, has helped philosophers add to, refine, or reject parts of the Lewis theory (see, for example, Cabaco 2002; Jackman 1999; Gilbert 1996). But with so much attention to Lewis’s sophisticated theory of convention, there has been less attention to ordinary and social scientific use of the concept. More to the point, convention is actually one of the *less* utilized concepts in this family in ordinary and social scientific discourse. While I can recall numerous

times when a strange behavior was explained to me with “well, it’s a custom there to...” I can recall few conversations in which an actual behavior was explained to me using the word “convention.” Even when examining more familiar notions from this family, then, philosophers often focus on something different from ordinary or social scientific explanations of social behavior.

Philosophers’ investigating of this realm also often focused on the underlying *ontology* of the entities described. When someone asks “What is a custom?” there are at least three different ways one might try to answer the question. One might try to specify what most *experts* have in mind when they use the term (the definition or meaning of “custom”). One could try to describe to how the term is *used most often* in ordinary discourse. Or one might try to precisely specify what kinds of *conditions in the world are being referred to* when people use that term (the ontology of customs). Many philosophers looking at social phenomena tend to gravitate toward the third project. Again, this is unsurprising. The underlying ontology of customs or norms (or joint action) is unclear in the way that the underlying ontology of dishwashers or suburbs is not, so there is much important philosophical clarification needing to be done there. But I think it is also important to look closely at our actual usage of these terms. We not only want to know how norms directly affect behavior, we want to know what people *believe* about norms. Even if people have completely erroneous beliefs about the features of norms, or about what norms are, those beliefs are still going to affect their behavior. Such beliefs will also affect what people say to others about the social world, thus affecting others’ beliefs and behaviors. Understanding social behavior involving norms and conventions requires knowing what people believe about these things, as much as understanding what sorts of things these entities are. In focusing largely on actually underlying ontology, philosophers can miss important facets of the way these notions are used by people to make sense of the social world.,

In general, the commitment of many philosophers to giving a *reforming and clarifying* account of the mechanics of the social world (perhaps in response to the unclarity of many traditional social scientific terms) can prevent them from being more helpful in enabling us to understand how people try to explain behavior using notions like “custom” and “norm.” Much philosophical work on the social leaves these problematic social explanations still mysterious. Despite the numerous attempts in various disciplines to define and clarify norms, conventions, culture, and the like we still don’t understand how we explain using these terms. In this paper, I hope to help improve this situation.

### 3. HOW NORM AND CUSTOM EXPLANATIONS WORK

#### 3.1. General structure of the category.

In my view, when people say that others are doing what they do because of norms, customs, culture, etc., they are trying to account for behavior using variants of a concept that might be called the “What’s Done” notion. When Bill says Jill does Y because Y is the custom, norm, etc., he is typically telling you that he thinks that a) lots of people in Jill’s group do Y, and b) the reason Jill and the others do Y is *because* they think lots of others do Y and/or expect Y to be done.<sup>1</sup> While each of the terms, “norm,” “custom,” “tradition,” etc. have some unique features of their own, they all evoke this core conjunctive idea in speakers and listeners when explanations are given using them. I suspect that “What’s Done” is a concept people use quite frequently. It can be invoked not only when these terms are used, but also when people describe situations with a variant of this construction: The X-group does/believes Y, as in “The Lisu build their houses on stilts,” or “joining the military is not an option for Amish people.” People can also be utilizing this concept without verbalizing it at all.<sup>2</sup>

I believe that when people speak or hear the terms from this family, they typically have this conjunctive concept in mind. When people use these terms with *both* conjuncts in mind, they are using the terms in their prototypical sense, a sense I’ll refer to as their *social conformity* meaning. One of the things that makes understanding these terms difficult, however, is that it seems to be permissible (though somewhat less so) to use these terms to describe situations in which versions of either of these conjuncts hold. One can say “drinking a six pack a night is the norm for people at this college” without necessarily having in mind that the reason people do this is because others do. The speaker might be using this terminology just to call attention to the fact that this is what lots of people do, whatever their reasons for doing it. English seems to allow this “high frequency” usage of the term “norm,” even though it is not how this term is prototypically used. These terms can also be used for situations when only variants of the second conjunct are true. It is somewhat permissible to talk about a norm or a custom in a group that need not actually be done by large numbers of people (e.g., Americans sitting down for three meals a day). Such practices can be called customs or norms if lots of people *believe* that lots of others do them or (more importantly) expect them to be done. If speakers think that there is a general expectation in a group that Y should be done, then it is not unacceptable to call that a norm for that group. So one might hear “drinking a six pack a night is the norm for people at this college” without thinking that the speaker

was speaking falsely when the actual median alcohol consumption for students is only three beers a night as long as everyone perceives a lot of social pressure to drink a six pack a night. A speaker using these terms this way is using them in what I call the *expectational* sense. No doubt, one of the things that makes understanding these terms confusing is that they are used in these different ways. There's the prototypical conjunctive usage, and the usage covering each of the two conjuncts. But if I am right about this, we can see how various different usages of these terms are related, without our having to assume they are the same usage. Knowing that there are these three usages for any of these terms saves us from having to search for a term's single underlying meaning. This should make understanding how these terms are used in explanations easier.<sup>3</sup>

### 3.2. How referring to norms etc. explains behavior.

If I am right about the core meaning of terms like “norm,” “custom,” “tradition,” etc., then we see why people act as though they are providing an explanation of behavior when they use these terms. When speakers say “Y is the norm here,” they are usually saying that a person or persons did Y *because* they thought lots of others do Y and/ or expect Y to be done. And in cases where that *is* the central cause of a behavior, using such terms accurately describes why the people did what they did.

How is it that other people's expectations and behaviors can cause people to behave in a certain way? They can do so because a) people do often act in certain ways because they are imitating others, b) others sometimes punish those who don't do what they are expected to do, and c) people try to avoid punishment (or gain praise). People routinely give social conformity explanations, then, because social conformity *is* such a common cause of behavior. It is a harder task, however, to say why people behave in these conformist ways. Many scholars in many different fields have views on this subject. To discuss these different views in detail would take a book length work in its own right. Nevertheless, it will be useful to make some remarks on what I think are the most plausible speculations about the roots of conforming behavior.

Let's assume with Darwin, Skinner and Decision Theorists that, in general, when agents receive benefits from engaging in a certain type of behavior they tend to continue behaving that way. When a behavior results in obvious harms, it tends to be discontinued (for a variety of reasons, including death of the agent). So what makes it beneficial to imitate, to praise and punish, and to respond to praise and punishment? It's quite straightforward to explain why agents respond to punishment and

praise. Punishment is, by definition, harmful to agents, so any rational or even conditionable agent seeks to avoid behaviors they anticipate would likely lead to their being punished by other agents. Punishment can take any form, from killing to avoiding the offending agent. A type of behavior can become a norm or custom if people engage in it because they believe others will punish them if they don't. Agents can also *reward other* agents for his or her behaviors in a similarly large range of ways, from a smile to granting land rights. When people do Y because they believe others are inclined to reward them for doing Y, then doing Y can also become a norm, custom, or convention.

But now the question arises -- why will certain behaviors tend to provoke widespread punishment or praise from others in the group? One obvious answer is that if large numbers of group members see that an individual's behavior (e.g., cutting down a valued fruit tree) can be harmful to them, it is in each of their interests to punish the offending agent. It is especially in their interest if doling out the punishment has few costs. (The more people assisting in or approving of the punishment, the less the costs of punishing.)<sup>4</sup>

When you have large numbers of people willing to punish those who do Y because doing Y is harmful to group members, avoiding doing Y easily becomes a group's norm. Economist Robert Frank (1988) believes that having that a tendency to punish harmers is a great asset to a group, since the deterrent effect greatly reduces the amount of harms that group members will suffer from potential harmer's behaviors. He believes that groups where members had an *innate* tendency to punish would have tremendous advantages over groups that didn't. He suspects that humans have consequently evolved to be genetically predisposed toward vengeful behavior, with a tendency to want to punish harmers, even *when* the punishing comes with a risk of harm to the punisher. When a large number of people are inclined to punish people for doing Y, a large number of people will be inclined not to do Y, and a norm of not doing Y becomes established. A similar story can be told about rewards. If a small amount of reward (such as praise) greatly increases another's helpful behavior, it's in each group members' interest to reward such behaviors.

It can also be in each group member's interests to punish unusual non-conforming behavior and to praise doing typical expected behavior, even if the unusual behavior isn't causing any obvious direct harm to group members. An agent is best able to make plans when he or she is able to predict what her environment will be like. The most important surrounding environment for any human agent is the behaviors of other human beings. One can't make plans when one is surrounded by people routinely engage in unusual unexpected behaviors, any more than one could if the weather

were totally unpredictable. Consequently, agents have an interest in praising others simply for engaging in a certain expected behavior, and punishing them if they do not. This too can lead to a norm or custom forming when enough agents behave in a certain way to avoid punishment.<sup>5</sup>

It is also in people's interests simply to *imitate* what others are doing in various circumstances, whether or not others specifically praise or punish them for doing so.

This is yet another way in which people engage in certain types of behavior because others are doing or expecting it. The social scientific literature is full of complex mathematical models showing why imitating the behaviors of others is generally a rational thing to do (see for example, Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman 1981). I believe that the usefulness of imitation can be shown by some much more simple considerations as well. To begin with, if an actor can just observe that a particular sort of behavior tends to be correlated with receiving benefits and avoiding harms, it is rational to imitate that same behavior in order to get those benefits for oneself. To take a particularly dramatic example: there is no better guide for how to successfully navigate a mine field than following in the footsteps of others who have made it through unscathed. And not only does observing others for imitation tell us *which* actions lead to benefits, it does so far more quickly and at less cost than non-observational trial and error learning (see Bandura 1977), very obviously so in the mine example. When one can see that imitating a certain behavior will lead to a reward, imitating others is clearly the way to go.

Furthermore, even if an agent is in no position to see whether or not a type of behavior immediately brings benefits, imitation is still generally a good strategy. Let's assume that, in general, actors will tend to *not* repeat behaviors that are similar to those which have brought them harm in similar situations. The class of *repeat behaviors*, then, will consist mostly of behaviors that are beneficial or neutral (so long as the environment doesn't change too much.) This means that if it is repeated behaviors that are being copied, imitators are likely to benefit from the behavior that they imitate. But how can a would-be imitator know whether a candidate for copying is a repeat or a first time behavior? They don't actually need to know. If various factors make the number of neutral/helpful repeat behaviors modeled larger than the number of untested first-time behaviors, copying *every* behavior automatically means that one is copying more-likely-to-be-beneficial behaviors. One such factor would be the organism's having stronger tendencies toward habit, than toward producing novel behaviors. Since producing truly novel behaviors is intrinsically difficult for all agents, we, like all organisms, are invariably creatures of habit. Another factor would be if

group members tend to be long-lived. When the number of times an agent faces a similar sort of behavioral choice situation becomes large compared to the range of possible behavioral options for this situation, more behaviors must be repeat behaviors. (Think of this as analogous to dice-throwing; after six throws, all outcomes must be repeats.) The longer-lived agents tend to be, the greater the likelihood that a given agent is in the mostly repeat stage for that type of behavior. We are a species whose members tend to live long. And any inclination toward being more inclined to copy older rather than younger group members would only increase the likelihood of copying more beneficial repeat behaviors.<sup>6</sup>

A few simple conditions, then, would make imitating a good general strategy. We have every reason to believe those conditions are met in human communities. (For mathematical models of which other conditions make imitation advantageous see Boyd and Richerson 1985, 2005.) And if imitating is so advantageous for members of our species, it would be beneficial for natural selection to have hard-wired in a tendency for us to imitate. There is indeed, much evidence that such hard-wiring for imitation exists (See, for example, Metzliff 1996 for a discussion of infants' unlearned tendencies to imitate). If, for any reason, large numbers of people happen to be doing behavior Y, and people have a tendency to imitate, then large numbers of people will come to do Y because lots of other people are doing Y-- and you have norms, customs, etc. beginning.

It is unsurprising, then, that in deciding how to behave, humans look to imitate others, and to pay attention to what rewards and punishments their behaviors bring from other group members. It is therefore also unsurprising that people should often explain certain behaviors by saying that someone did it because this is how others behaved, or expected them to behave – a social conformity explanation. Explaining behaviors in terms of norms, customs and conventions is pointing to very real causes of behavior that we should not be surprised to find.

#### 4. WHAT NORM ETC. EXPLANATIONS CONTRAST WITH

In addition to giving a custom or norm explanation to point to the conformity causes of behavior, speakers often give such accounts to emphasize that the behavior in question is *not* best explained using other common explanatory schemas. To some degree, all accounts and all descriptions are implicitly contrastive. Telling someone a flower is white also automatically tells him it is not red. Some descriptions, however, are meant to be especially contrastive. A speaker will sometimes try to help a listener by saying “P will be present” when she thinks the listener has little idea what to

expect. But at other times, the main reason a speaker says that P will be present is that they are worried that the listener expects Q (and not P) to be present. Saying “a Green Valley student will receive the basketball scholarship” is not an especially contrastive description. Saying “a 5’ 5” student will receive the basketball scholarship” is. The main reason the speaker mentions 5’5” is that she believes it is especially noteworthy, since it contrasts with standard expectations. I believe that one of the main reasons that people feel inclined to overtly state that some behavior has one of the social conformity explanations is that they want to emphasize that it is via social conformity, *not* because of *other* common causes of behavior by themselves, that this behavior is taking place.

Think of people as agents having to survive and flourish, like all organisms, by navigating through a complex environment on the basis of internal goals and subgoals. Over time, agents become structured such that, in various environments, various lower-level subgoals are activated in the service of more general goals. A goal of eating can activate a subgoal of roaming through a forest in search of food. Finding tall fruit trees can activate a subgoal of trying to get that fruit down. That, in turn, activates a subgoal of getting up in the tree, which could, depending on various other things, activates a subgoal of climbing that tree, or going to get a ladder. Why do people have the subgoals that they do at various times? *Social conformity* explanations emphasize (among other things) that an activity of a particular grain size is there because people are trying to satisfy a subgoal that has come to be there because group members reward and punish certain activities. In certain circles, for example, the accepted way to achieve the goal of ingesting food that’s been obtained is via the socially approved subgoal of moving food to the mouth with a knife and fork.<sup>7</sup> Social conformity terms are often used to emphasize that the behavior-type of the grain size being discussed is not there due to other factors. The behavior is *not* there due to the operation of factors that can, *without* involving social conformity mechanisms, lead to the creation of certain kinds of subgoals that are activated in support of deeper goals.

Probably the most common alternative to social conformity accounts is explaining behavior as the result of subgoals that have come to be there through *rational inference*.<sup>8</sup> People often try to explain behavior by assuming that actors are often able to *infer*, from their beliefs about how the world works, which types of actions will fairly efficiently achieve the strongest desires in their goal set. Agents, in other words, are often assumed to do what they *rationally* believe will get them their goals. The project of explaining people’s behavior, then, is often one of showing how such behavior was rational, given the agent’s beliefs and desires. Why was Fred rushing for his front door at 8:55?

We often explain behaviors like this with a rationality explanation, saying things like, “he wanted to make his plane on time, and he believed that to get through the heavy traffic he would have to leave at 9:00 to get there an hour before the flight left at 11:00. So he set a goal for himself of being out his front door by 9:00.” A formalized version of this type of thinking about action planning is called Decision Theory and is often used by economists and political scientists to explain behavior. The desires or goals used to explain a person’s behavior, here, could be self-interested ones; it is also possible that they are other-interested *moral* goals. In either case, a behavior is explained as the one taken because it was thought to be a way of acting that would lead to the actor’s goal’s being achieved. I suspect that, quite often, speakers will say that a behavior type is the norm or custom to emphasize that this is *not* a behavior being done because the actors think that it is an efficient way for them to achieve their goals.

Rational inference explanations work by assuming, as nearly all behavioral explanations implicitly must, that behavior is the result of a set of internal mental mechanisms responding to the impingements of stimuli in the external environment (see Jones 2002). (Neither the environment, nor an internal structure is usually sufficient for producing a certain type of action on its own.) What’s caused the internal structures to be pushing the organism to do behavior Y (in this environment)? With rationality explanations, internal goals and beliefs are assumed interact *with each other* to produce a series of inner states, ending in instructions to “do Y” in process analogous to *calculation*. In other behavioral explanations, speakers discuss internal structures that have come to be as they are as because they have been somehow modified by the external environment. Some of these of these internal structures will have been created by *evolutionary* trial and error elimination pressures. Others will be structured as they are because of the way that earlier internal structures have been affected by external environments in the *recent* past. Social conformity explanations are accounts which seek to emphasize that an agent’s *external* environment likely consisted of certain social pressures, and that the relevant *internal* structures that have come to be present are ones disposed to produce behaviors that reap rewards in this social environment. Other accounts emphasize other mental mechanisms that have been produced, or other kinds of environments that have helped produce them.

Sometimes speakers try to explain the behavior of a certain grain size as being the way that it is because of basic *biological* goals and subgoals. Exposure to various natural or social environments over the agent’s lifetime doesn’t make much of a difference. The act of rapidly withdrawing one’s

hand from a hot surface, for example, would probably be explained as being an automatic innate response rather than a socially learned one. (Rapidly withdrawing one's hand while shouting "Jaju jaju" and stomping one's foot, however, might well be given a social conformity explanation if one had learned from watching others that this is the proper way to express one's pain.) We sometimes give a social conformity explanation to emphasize that a certain way of behaving is *not* an innate biologically-based one.

When behavioral schemas are not innate biological ones, they must come to be through an environment (or beliefs about it) impacting various psychological mechanisms of the agent. Social conformity accounts constitute one large family of environment-impacting-psyche explanations, but there are many others. Among these others, some-times the role of the environment is emphasized, and sometimes people's psychological dispositions are. My suspicion is that when the psychological mechanisms that can result in the same types of behavior in an environment are numerous or hard to characterize, speakers tend to emphasize the role of the environment. Why did central Africans have little contact with Europeans in the pre-colonial era? One kind of answer is that the harsh environment of the Sahara desert, in combination with a wide variety of different kinds of inner experiences produced by trying to interact with it, left Africans discouraged about trying to cross it (see Diamond 1997). Since the variety of the inner experiences with the Sahara are difficult to describe, due to their being diverse and numerous, speakers often leave out that part of the explanation, and instead talk just about the environmental conditions that helped cause the resulting behavior patterns. This is something they can talk about in a simple unified way.

People giving explanations also tend to emphasize the environment when the psychological mechanisms involved are *easily* characterized and well known, but the nature of the environment that agents are reacting to is less known. Why do the Inuit of the Baffin Islands wear thick clothing much of the year? One filled-out explanation is that the climate of the Baffin Islands is very cold, all people want themselves and their offspring to be warm, and putting on thick clothing makes people warm. Since the facts that cold people desire to be warm, and that thick clothing makes one warm are hardly ever *unknown* to anyone, speakers, wanting to communicate efficiently, will articulate only the part of the explanation less likely to be already known: it is very cold in the Baffin Islands--so that is why the Inuit wear thick clothing. Sometimes social conformity accounts are given to emphasize that a given type of behavior is not best explained in this environment-emphasizing manner.<sup>9</sup>

People also give social conformity accounts to emphasize that what produces the behavior in question is *not* another type of inner psychological mechanisms. When social conformity is not involved, speakers tend to explain behavior in terms of inner psychological mechanisms if they believe these mechanisms are not already well known, or if they believe the psychological mechanisms are not too numerous and diverse to describe. Someone might explain, for example, why little Tommy interacts so much more affectionately with his mother than his father with accounts like this: “A psychological feature of abused children is that they tend to become more affectionate toward the abusive parent than the non-abusive parent.” A social conformity term, by contrast, would have been used to emphasize that being more affectionate towards ones mother is simply how one is expected to behave, rather than having some other more interesting specific psychological cause.

In summary, speakers often give certain accounts of behavior to emphasize that this behavior is not better explained in other ways. These conformity explanations are often given to emphasize that this particular behavior is not an innate response, not the result of surprising psychological mechanisms, not forced to be this way by the natural environment, and is not done because the actor inferred that it was a rational way to achieve his desires. Instead, behavior Y was done because agents were imitating others doing Y, or because they thought that others expected them to use method Y. Behaviors done for this reason are called customs, norms, conventions, traditions, etc.<sup>10</sup>

It is important to not that while social conformity terms are often used to contrast with other types of behavioral explanations, that doesn't mean that a speaker giving a social conformity account must assume that these other behavior-producing features play no role in producing conformity behavior. Indeed, these other behavior producing features must, at some point, be a factor in producing social conformity behavior. If someone behaves in manner Y because they are imitating someone who was imitating someone etc. who behaved in manner Y, some other factors must have produced the original behavior being imitated. Furthermore, there must be some deeper cause -- psychological, biological, rationality, or whatever – explaining why an agent *wanted to* imitate someone's behavior (otherwise a conformity explanation would be circular). Similarly, if the cause of someone's producing a behavior was that others in the group expected it, there must be some rational, psychological, or biological cause *of this expectation*. Other deeper mental mechanisms, then, must always be part of the cause of conformity behavior. Still, conformity terms can be used to contrast with other behavioral explanations, since these other mechanisms can often produce

behavior *without* involving social conformity. The use of conformity terms is often used to signal to people that the behavior in question is, here, not the result of these other mechanisms acting on their own.

## 5. MORE ON NON-PROTOTYPICAL FREQUENCY AND EXPECTATIONAL USAGE OF THE TERMS.

I have argued that the prototypical meaning of saying that a behavior is a norm, custom, convention, etc., is that this behavior is 1) done by a large percentage of group members in a certain situation, and 2) done *because* a large number of others do it or expect it done. But it is also sometimes acceptable to use these terms to describe situations in which versions of *either* conjunct hold. We sometimes use the term, “norm,” for example, to mean only the statistically most frequent behavior within a class of behaviors. It can be acceptable to use this term, even if there is no expectation or awareness among others of the frequency of this behavior. Demographers and psychologists often use the term “norm” this way. A scholar might talk, for example, of it being the norm among American males to have six sex partners before being married. This need not mean that this is how many partners Americans think they should have, or a number that people would be surprised if someone *didn't* have. Such scholars simply mean that this is the most common number of partners for people to have, regardless of whether people are aware of this. The pure frequency use of these terms is probably less common than the conjunctive use, because, more often than not, people *do* pay attention to what others are doing, and develop expectations on the basis of this. The frequency usage is more common among academics because they are more prone to study behaviors that lay people might not be prone to pay attention to. Academics also study secretive behaviors that it would be difficult to know about without intensive study. Still, terms like “norm” are sometimes used in this pure frequency sense in ordinary parlance.

And how often must a behavior be done before it is called a norm, in this frequency sense? I think people follow a rough rule of thumb specifying that the more frequent the behavior is, the more acceptable it is to call it a norm or custom. It is most permissible to call a behavior “the norm” if it is done by everyone in the group in certain circumstances. It is somewhat less acceptable if it is done only by a majority. When it is done by less than a majority, the fewer the number of group members who do it, the less acceptable it is to call it a norm. And if there is a behavior that behavior Y is *mutually exclusive* with that is more frequent in the population than Y (e.g. wearing

boxers vs. briefs), it becomes fairly unacceptable to say Y is a norm, even if done by large numbers of people.

One might, however, say that Y is the norm in a population, even if another behavior is more frequent, if “norm” is being used in the *expectation* sense. It is sometimes acceptable to use the words “norm,” “custom,” etc. when a behavior is merely expected, whether or not it is actually frequent. Note that the word “expectation” has two meanings, and terms like “norm” can be used with either. One use of “expect” is normative – when people say they expect something to be done, they often mean they think it *should* be done (e.g. “I expect this room to be clean when I get back). The other sense of “expect” is purely descriptive. Speakers often talk about people “expecting” something to be done when they simply believe it will be. When group members tend to regularly behave in certain ways, observers will generally come to have the simple inductive belief that this is the behavior that will probably happen in these circumstances. Quite often, people expect something to be done in *both* the normative and descriptive senses of “expect.” A descriptive sense of expect can easily come to take on normative overtones when people who regularly do Y a) recognize that others know this and plan their own actions around the belief that Y will be done, b) recognize that others will feel thwarted if they are unable to realize their plans, and c) feel that it is not rational or moral to needlessly cause others to feeling frustrated. “Others believe I will do Y” can thus turn into a feeling of “I ought to do Y” on Bill’s part, and a feeling of “Bill ought to do Y” (in order, at the very least, not to frustrate others) on other people’s parts. Many other moral or rational considerations can lead people to have the normative expectation that Y be done, as well, but this is all that’s needed to give “expectation” a minimally normative reading.

Various factors, then, leave community members thinking that behavior Y will be done, or thinking that behavior Y should be done, or both. When group members come to have an expectation that something will be done, most actors in the group, hoping to avoid punishment, or to simply avoid resentment for defying expectations, will do the behavior expected of them. With lots of people doing something because others expect it to be done, we get what I’ve called the prototypical “conformity” sense of “norm” or “custom.” Circumstances may arise, however, in which there is an expectation that people do Y, but that few people actually do. New technology, for example, might lead many to abandon an old practice before people realize or approve of its being abandoned. It seems to be somewhat permissible in our language to say that there is a “norm” or “custom” of Y-doing in that group, even though only part of the second of the two main conditions of being a norm

or custom in the prototypical sense is met.<sup>11</sup> We can still speak, for example, of a custom of hand writing thank-you notes for gifts received, even if a majority of gift-receivers fail to do so. Anthropologists often speak of certain rules of behavior as being part of a particular culture, even though these rules are infrequently followed. There are a couple of likely reasons people still feel free to use these terms. Like prototypical conformity norms, these are situations where groups feel compelled to do certain behaviors. Like conformity norms, these dispositions do not come from our biological make-up, from individual learning, or from rational self-interest. Like conformity norms, people feel pressure to act in certain ways based on other peoples' expectation. For one reason or another, they sometimes do not act in these ways, despite social pressure to do so. But situations where people feel social pressure yet don't act on it are probably rare enough that we don't feel the need to coin new words to describe them. So the usual terms which describe social pressure situations – “custom,” “norm,” “tradition,” etc., are pressed into service. It seems permissible to use terms like “norm,” “culture,” etc., in this expectational sense when lots of people believe that lots of people expect that Y be done. How many people? There certainly aren't numerically precise rules. In general, it seems that the more people believe that the more people expect Y, the more permissible it is to say that Y is the norm or custom of the group, even if few people are doing Y. If we were describing a state of affairs in which only a few people in the group believe that large numbers of group members expect people to buss their own table at fast food restaurants, it would not be permissible to describe this group as having a custom of bussing their own tables. If the situation were that nearly everyone believes that only a few group members expect this, we couldn't call it a custom then either. But if most people in the group believe that most others expect this to be done, then it is somewhat permissible in our language to speak of that group having a custom of bussing table at fast food restaurants, even if, for one reason or another, few do.

It is this permissibility, I think, that allows people to speak of our society of having a norm of extreme thinness for women. The number of American women as thin as fashion models is very small. And research shows that men, at least, do not prefer women to be as thin as typical fashion models (see Buss 1994; Grice 1988). There is neither a majority of women who are that thin, nor does a majority expect women to be that thin, but our society is full of books and magazines, even scholarly ones, decrying this “norm” of extreme thinness. One can understand how people can make this claim, if one realizes that there is an expectational use of these terms. Only a small minority of people expect women to be this thin, but lots of women believe (falsely) that lots of people expect

women to be this thin – so a norm does exist in the expectational sense. If people feel social pressure, they feel social pressure, even if there is not widespread acquiescence to the pressure, and even if there is not really widespread social expectation. Our language permits us to describe this feeling existing in a group using terms like “norm” and “custom” in non-prototypical senses. Because this sense exists, we need to be cautious about inferring anything about the widespreadness of a behavior when someone speaks of the presence of a norm or custom in the group. And because of the pure “frequency” sense of these terms, and because there need be only a perceived expectation, we have to be cautious about what to infer about the *actual expectations* of group members when we hear people talk of norms and customs. Terms like “norm,” “custom,” “convention,” etc. are typically used when large numbers of people do something because large numbers of others do or expect them. But we mustn’t forget that these can also be used when versions of either conjunct are true.

## 6. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DIFFERENT SOCIAL CONFORMITY TERMS

I have been arguing that terms like “norm,” “custom,” and the like share some central core notions. But we should also acknowledge that each of these terms has some especially emphasized or additional features that make it different from others. Let’s look briefly at their differences.

The concept of *tradition*, like the others, prototypically stresses that lots of others do action Y, and that others doing Y is a central reason that others do it. But “tradition” especially emphasizes that the behaviors that people feel compelled to imitate have been in the *past*. If the idea that Y has been done in the past is considered to make an action more worthy of doing than the mere fact that others do Y, then we speak of Y as a tradition, as opposed to one of the others.

The term “convention” tends to be used when the speaker wants to especially emphasize that the cause of the behavior is that others do or expect it and *not* due to other factors, especially not the rationality of the behavior. In addition, we are especially apt to use “convention” more than other terms if the behavior initially took the form it did because of arbitrary agreement among group members. If a speaker answers the question “Why does everyone paint their house white here?” by saying “It’s the convention” she is trying to emphasize this is not done for rational or other reasons. People paint their houses white simply because others do or expect this.

The term “custom” has the special feature of being able to be used to describe the behavior of very small groups – and even, sometimes, of single individuals. We cannot say, “it was Arthur’s

norm to talk a walk every day at 3:00,” but we can say, “it was Arthur’s custom to talk a walk every day at 3:00.” As with the other terms, we are saying that the reason Arthur does this is not because of rationality, biology, or anything else, but done simply because it is what is done or expected done – in this case, done or expected by *himself*. Now, the term custom, of course, is more often used to describe behavior common in large groups. But we do have, in the term “custom,” the ability to describe the behavior of very small groups that has a similar type of cause.<sup>13</sup>

The term, “norm” seems to be the generic term we use to describe behavior frequently done because others do or expect it. It seems to have few special features of its own. Perhaps the others are more specialized terms that we use when we do want to emphasize more specific things about social pressure. One noteworthy feature that the term “norm” does seem to have is that we are seem to be more comfortable using it, rather than the other terms in this family, to discuss features that are merely common in a population. Our ordinary usage of the term norm seems to follow certain scientific usage in that it can be used when a trait is merely *frequent* in a population – no matter what its cause. We can comfortably talk about being shorter than 3’ 6” as being “the norm” for kindergarteners. But we can’t talk about this being their custom, convention, or tradition. Because norm is often used in some sciences in a purely statistical sense, I think that it can be commonly used this way in ordinary language, whereas terms like “custom” or “convention” are used in this “pure frequency” way much more rarely.

The term in this family whose usage seems to have the least stringent requirement is “culture.” Part of the broadness of the term “culture,” comes from the fact that this term is also being used to describe things outside of this family all together. (E.g., the special knowledge produced by and required for understanding certain types of art is also called “culture.”) But even when the term is used to describe a type of behavior, our language allows the term to have very broad application. Prototypically, “culture” is used to describe the same core circumstances as the others: frequent behavior in a group, caused by large numbers of others doing or expecting it. But it is permissible to call various behavior “cultural” when either of the two central requirements of this “what’s done” family are only weakly satisfied. We seem to be comfortable referring to a certain behavior as being done because that it part of that group’s culture, even if group members actually rarely engage in the behavior (e.g., “kilt wearing is a big part of Scottish culture”). Now it is somewhat permissible to use any of these terms for behaviors that are not actually frequent. But it seems more permissible to describe infrequent behaviors with “culture” than other terms. More significantly,

unlike these other terms, we can use the term “culture” to describe behavior that is not only infrequent, but for which there is only a weak expectation that it be done, or an expectation held by small numbers of people. It is permissible in our language to say things like, “Eliminating one’s enemies is part of urban gang culture,” even if few gang members do kill rivals, believe that others members will kill rivals, or believe other members really ought to spend their time killing rivals.

And as with the term “norm,” we are also pretty comfortable using “culture” even when there aren’t social conformity mechanisms at work. A practice that is present in a group because of rationality, or because of the way a biological disposition is manifested in that particular environment can be said to be a part of that group’s culture, even without the intervening mechanisms of social conformity. We use the word “culture” to describe situations where a particular behavior is both relatively distinctive to that group, yet is very widespread *within* that group. Most of the time this combination happens because people are copying or responding to pressure from other group members (as opposed to acting on a pan-human disposition. But sometimes, the environment and various other psychological mechanisms can also cause behavior that is both group-distinctive and widespread within it. The family resemblance of behaviors with these surface traits to behaviors caused by social conformity mechanisms, leads us to label all such behaviors “part of a group’s culture” despite their not all being caused by social conformity mechanisms.

The term “culture” then, while prototypically describing “what’s done” behaviors, can be used very broadly. It can describe common behaviors and not so-common behaviors, expected and not-so-expected behaviors, and behaviors caused by conformity mechanisms, and behaviors not so caused. This broadness of the concept of culture is one of the reasons that scholars with such diverse interests in types and causes of human behavior can all be housed comfortably within the discipline of cultural anthropology. But it also means that when anthropologists describe a behavior as part of a group’s culture, much supplemental description is needed to give readers a clear picture of exactly how common, how expected, and what the causes of the behavior are.

## 7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the social sciences and in everyday language, we have lots of different ways of explaining behavior. One family of ways in which we do so is through using terms like “norm,” “custom,” and “convention.” Exactly how these terms explain, and how these explanations differ from and relate

to other kinds of explanations is not always clear. My hope is that this paper can help make things a bit clearer.

When people say that a particular practice Y is a norm, custom, convention, etc. in a group, they are typically saying that this practice is widespread in the group, and that a central reason it is widespread is that people in the group imitate what others do, or do what others think they will do, or ought to do. People conform in this way because they often get some kind of punishment if they don't and reward if they do. These terms are often used to emphasize that this behavioral practice is caused by peer pressure and not solely due to other factors that often cause behavior to be what it is. "Norm" and other terms can be used to emphasize that people *don't* engage in this behavior because it is the most rationally efficient way of achieving their goals, or because biology or the environment made this behavior inevitable. These terms are used to emphasize the social pressure roots of certain behaviors. Which of these terms we use depends on what other feature of the situation we want to emphasize.

Further examination is required, I think, before we fully understand the details of how these concepts function in everyday thinking. I have been writing, for example, as if speakers operate with a unified conceptual category of "common behavior caused by seeing what others do or expect us to do." But it is also possible that people usually think about these situations using different concepts that are working together. Maybe a term like "norm" just initially connotes behavior that is frequent. Perhaps people then invariably combine this notion with a folk psychological belief that people are inclined to do what others do. These different ideas might work together to produce social conformity explanations, instead of there being a unified explanatory concept made up of different parts. Which way this overall explanation is typically produced in people's minds (if there is a systematic way) is not yet clear.

It is also not completely clear how these different terms used in this type of explanation (unified or not) are related to each other. While I suspect that there is a core explanatory concept from which various more specific concepts can be produced by adding features, it is also possible that we have quite distinct notions of norm, concept, convention etc., which happen to have a vague family resemblance to each other, or which happen to be subsumable under some common general principles (unbeknownst to most speakers). Such questions concerning the details of how these explanations are constructed in people's minds are interesting ones for further research.

Whatever the details of how these terms are used in ordinary accounts, they are certainly important for explaining behavior there, and in the social sciences. I hope that by clarifying the implicit general form of these accounts, I've made it easier to sort out which parts of our complicated human behavior should be accounted for by which types of our complicated ways of explaining it. Hopefully, we can now understand a little more clearly what is meant when someone says to a new faculty member "it's our custom to have a beer after the colloquium."

#### Footnotes

1. We often say something is being done "*out of custom/tradition/convention*" when we want to especially emphasize that *the reason* that people are doing this is because others do it or expect it done. One should note that when things are done for this reason, it obviously must be that case that the *first* people doing this activity had to be doing it for reasons other than other's behaviors or expectations. Note also that there can be (indeed there *must be*) *other* reasons why imitation/expectation is a reason for people to act. Someone might, for example, put sugar in his tea because he was imitating someone else doing this – while the *reason that this behavior was imitated* could be that we have a biological predisposition to imitate other's behavior regarding food.
2. Social scientists sometimes try to use these terms in different or more precise manners than they are used in ordinary language. They rarely succeed. Being speakers of English, social scientists invariably import ordinary language usages into their discussions when they use these terms (and their readers certainly do). In this paper, I will be concentrating more on the more common ordinary language usages. But because of the overlap, doing so can tell us much about social scientific usage as well.
3. It's possible that "What's Done" is a concept with what linguist George Lakoff calls a "radial" structure, with a prototypical core meaning, surrounded by less typical "extended" meanings (1987). It seems plausible that "What's Done" is a radial concept with the complex core meaning: "common behavior caused by seeing what others do or expect us to do." We have come to *extend* the usage of terms prototypically used to describe this core to also describe *just* "common behavior" and *just* "expected behavior" situations alone.
4. A continual puzzle for decision theorists is why agents will punish at all, rather than "free ride" and hope that others will bear the costs of punishing. There are various proposals in the literature. The most common is some kind of group selection in which groups whose members had hard wired proclivities to punish were much more successful than groups that did not, with the result that many of us now have hard-wired genetic proclivities to punish, even at great costs to ourselves see Boyd and Richerson 2005; Frank 1995). Another suggestion is that those who fail to punish, are themselves punished, as are those who fail to punish punishers, in a continuous iteration (see Binmore 1998, and see Cinyaguguma, Page, and Putterman 2004 for a mixture of both methods). I suspect that a common type of situation is one where the benefits of punishing are high but one *cannot* expect others to punish – so people readily take on the burden of punishment. One can't expect others to do the punishing when they didn't see the transgression, when they aren't affected

as much, or their esteem isn't as important to the harmers. In these cases, free riding is not possible. Punishing one's offspring provide good examples of these sorts of cases.

5. This gives us some clues about which "grain size" of behavior are considered candidates for being customs or norms. If a group of kids at a summer camp all began running in the morning, would the custom be "morning running" "morning exercise" or "morning running with a long stride"? If the group is indifferent to anyone's particular running form, then running with a certain form is not part of the custom. If, on the other hand, someone who went swimming in the morning instead of running was scorned by the group, then we would say the custom was a custom of morning running, nor merely morning exercise. Similar things can be said about customs and norms, and the "grain size" of the activity people feel disposed to *imitate*.

6. Thorny questions of how similar behaviors have to be before they count as repeat behaviors, how similar to choice situations they have to be before they count as the same, and how we can distinguish and count possible behavioral variants need not be answered in order to roughly determine the rough *relative* sizes of these behavioral class ranges vis a vis each other.

7. Social conformity explanations are most often used to explain "mid-level" subgoals. Conformity explanations are not usually used to explain why certain fine-grained motor movements are the ones used to try to achieve certain subgoals. Social pressure and imitation lead people to do certain types of *overall* activity, but groups seldom care about the exact fine-grained motor movements used (e.g. bell-ringing, but not the arm movements doing it is likely to be termed the custom of a group). Similarly, deep background goals are often thought to be there because of biology or some other source. We don't use social pressure explanations, for example, to explain why people eat. That said, it is possible (though less common), to give conformity explanations for almost any subgoal level. Someone can discover that belching after meals is a custom in a group and develop a deep-seated (seemingly biological) disposition to do so. And the French have detailed customs regarding the exact manner to hold a spoon while eating soup.

8. I believe that this is the single most common way of explaining behavior *across* the various social sciences as well as in ordinary conversation. *Within* a given social science (or branch of one), other ways of explaining behavior may be more common.

9. People also sometimes explain behavior without using conformity terminology by speaking about the *social* environment rather than the *natural* one. Not all social explanations are social *conformity* explanations. An external *social* environment can just as strongly cause people to behave in certain ways via similar environment-impacting-psyche mechanisms as an external natural environment can. A rash of thefts, for example, is sometimes explained by high unemployment. Marxists, Structuralists, and other social theorists often seem to explain behavior by assuming that people have certain taken-for-granted mental states, and then explicitly discussing how a particular social environment will lead to certain behaviors (via those states). Jackson and Pettit call these sorts of accounts structural explanations. Social conformity explanations are sometimes given to emphasize that something more than just external social structure is involved in causing a behavior.

Jackson and Pettit (1992), however, (like Garfinkel, 1981) seem to erroneously assume that

internal psychological mechanisms need not play a part in such explanations. But unless the external environment affects all the organisms it impinges upon in the same way *regardless of internal structure*, the internal structure of the organisms involved *must* play a crucial causal role in producing the resulting net behavior. The fact that we often don't overtly discuss these causally relevant internal structures does not mean that they need not be part of the full explanation of the behavior (see Jones 2002).

10. For completeness sake we should note that such terms are often used in a contrastive manner in another way. Recall that one of the meanings of "norm" (though not the most prototypical one) is simply the behavior type done most frequently in certain circumstances. Sometimes, then, saying that a behavior is the norm or custom is specifically done to let listeners know that, contrary to what they might expect, this behavior is actually done quite frequently.

11. Scholars like Philip Pettit (2002), along with others, often miss this expectational sense in their discussions of norms. But such terms are used this expectational way quite often in the social sciences, as well as ordinary language (see Flores 1990; Nagel 2000).

12. Psychologist Gordon Allport, in 1923, first described this type of situation, where people may try to conform to a behavior that is thought to be common but isn't, and termed it "pluralistic ignorance." Pluralistic Ignorance is widely discussed in the social science literature (see, for example, Lambert et. al. 2003).

13. It seems that we can also use the term "norm" in the pure frequency sense for single individuals. We can say things like "Getting up at 11 is the norm for Bill." But it would be highly unusual to talk about norms in the sense of regularity plus expectations (or just expectation) to talk about single individuals.

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*Todd E. Jones is the chair of the Philosophy Department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Research interests include the nature of explanation in the social and natural sciences. Recent Publications include: "How many New Yorkers must like bagels before 'New Yorkers like bagels'? Analyzing collective ascription" ( in Philosophical Forum) and "Special sciences: still a flawed argument after all these years" ( in Cognitive Science). He has degrees in Cognitive Science and Anthropology, as well as Philosophy.*

