

Measuring Social Norms

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By now, there is a consensus in social sciences that social norms—or beliefs about appropriateness of actions or outcomes shared by the members of some group—are the devices that help people in the group to coordinate their actions, work together, and cooperate. However, there are various mechanisms through which such common beliefs can arise (e.g., traditions, moral reasoning). This implies that the ideas about what is right or wrong in a given context can differ even among close members of the community. Such multiplicity of normative views can have tangible economic consequences for societies (e.g., polarization). We propose a new incentive-compatible task to measure multiple normative views in a given context and discover that not only people have multiple views in the simplest imaginable situations like the Dictator Game (on average around 4 or 5 views), but also that they are aware of this multiplicity and consider it when deciding how much to sanction others. We find that pluralism breeds tolerance. Our new method provides an opportunity for researchers to map normative landscapes in any context of interest and to make sense of complex political interactions that can emerge in them. I summarize by providing some broad methodological guidelines on how to study normative landscapes in different contexts. The suggestions are rooted in the new theory of human mind that we have recently developed (Theory of Minds, see my website).