

Conformity & Norms: The Individual Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper looks at conformity and norms of individuals in groups. The existing research literature has generally looked at 'norms' in a group or social setting, and studied conformity accordingly. This, perhaps, is a western view. The present paper emphasises a different classification of 'norms', including the individual perspective (first person norms), and uses the new perspective to understand conformity at an individual as well as group level. This seems in line with the eastern cultures. Also, possibilities of variation in individual conformance at the cognitive and behavioural level are shown. Its implications and future research possibilities are indicated.

Introduction

Groups have been an important focus of numerous studies in OB literature. This is because of the recognition of the importance of groups as a relevant unit of analysis for the study of organizations.

The research on groups and group processes has come a long way since 1930s when Sherif, Newcomb, and Lewin started work on such varied topics as social norms, leadership, and group decision-making (Cartwright and Zander, 1968). It was further stimulated by work in late 1940s and 1950s on cooperation and competition, group structure, social power, conformity, and group task performance and problem solving (Paulus, 1980). The influence of groups on individual behavior is now, perhaps, taken for granted.

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Groups are composed of individuals. Groups have their own identity and characteristics, separate from the identity of its individual members. This implies that the individuals in a group exhibit behaviors, values, attitudes or other identifiable patterns that are similar or acceptable to the other group members. This is referred to as ‘conformity’, and is an important construct necessary for identification and categorization of individuals into ‘Groups’, without ‘conformity’, it is difficult to think of groups.

This raises the question of causality. Does similarity in individuals lead to group formation? Or does formation of a group lead to similar behaviors? Approaches such as the ‘theory of cognitive balance’ (Heider (1958), Newcomb (1953), Newcomb (1960), as cited in Cartwright, 1968) suggest the individual similarity as a causal variable for group formation. However approaches based on group influence would support the opposite. This seems like a chicken and egg problem. However, it is possible to resolve this to some extent, by understanding the conceptualization of ‘conformity’.

Conformity is defined as “some behavioral or attitudinal change that occurs as a result of some real or imagined group pressure” (Walker and Heyns (1962), Secord and Backman (1964), Brown (1965), Homans (1961), Krech, Crutchfield, and Ballachey (1962), Berg and Bass (1961), Asch (1952), as cited in Keisler, 1969).

Robbins (1989) defines conformity as “adjusting one’s behavior to align with the norms of the group.”

Keisler (1969) goes on to suggest that the term ‘conformity’ has been used in the research literature with at least three distinct connotations – (a) as an enduring personality characteristic, (b) as a cognitive or attitudinal change as a result of some (real or imagined) group pressure; and (c) conformity as “going along with the group” regardless whether the group includes only one other member or a hundred others. As a personality characteristic, it is an individual dispositional variable, whereas as a change (behavioral pattern) it is a group influence variable. The third explanation can be explained as the manifestation of an enduring personality characteristic.

A variation in this usage can be seen in the work of Hoffman (1957). His paper brings out the need to specify the level at which the conformity is being studied, as there may be conformity at (overt) behavioral level which is used to maintain non-conformance at a (covert) cognitive level. This seems to be supported partly by Keisler's (1963) observations.

Also, work group cohesiveness, defined as the group members' affinity for one another and their desire to remain part of the group (Cartwright, 1968) has traditionally been considered an important element of group dynamics (e.g., Cartwright, 1968; George and Bettenhausen, 1990). George and Bettenhausen (1990) found that group cohesiveness correlated significantly with prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior is defined as "... behavior that is (a) performed by a member of an organization, (b) directed toward an individual group, or organization with whom he or she interacts while carrying out his or her organizational role, and (c) performed with the intention of promoting the welfare of the individual, group, or organization toward which it is directed" (Brief and Motowidlo, 1986).

Further, Self-enhancing communications (Wortman & Linsenmeier, 1977), opinion conformity (Bryne & Rhamey, 1965), and favour doing (Wortman & Linsenmeier, 1977) have been related to the target's increased liking for the source. It is plausible that these lead to higher cohesiveness among groups.

Norms

Various researchers have defined norms from different perspectives. Some of them are given below.

Sherif (1936, as cited in McMahan and Kacmar, 1991) defines norms as the "customs, traditions, rules, values, fashions, and any other criteria of conduct which are standardized as a consequence of contact with individuals."

Steers (1981, as cited in McMahan and Kacmar, 1991) called norms a shared group standard which regulates member behavior.

Group norms are the informal rules that groups adopt to regulate and regularize group members' behavior (Feldman, 1984).

Norms are the “acceptable standards of behavior within a group that are shared by the group's members”(Robbins, 1989).

Norms are patterns of behaviors (and cognitions) acceptable to relevant others. Group norms are patterns of behaviors (and cognitions) acceptable to the group members.

Norms signify the shared values, attitudes, ideologies, etc. of a group or community.

Norms may be understood to describe “phenomena that are supposed to simplify human (inter) actions”(Dillard, 1987).

Norms can effectively control certain social situations as well as individual and group behaviors. While controlling these, norms also impact the environment of other individuals, in addition to impacting the enactment of the environment for an individual or group. The evolution and influence of norms has been established through various studies (Asch, 1965; Back, 1965; Coch and French, 1965; Sherif, 1965; Festinger, Schachter and Back, 1965; Smith and Bell, 1994; Jetter, Postmes, and Mcauliffe, 2002; Bartel and Saavedra, 2000; Abrams, Rutland, Cameron, and Marques, 2003).

It is argued that the optimal amount of coercion is not zero (Paquet, 1984). This is one of the reasons norms are needed for groups and communities to be functionally effective. Norms invoke commitment and demand conformity, thereby causing coercion on individual behaviors. Norms are argued to “have a powerful, and consistent, influence on group members' behaviour” (Hackman, 1976, as cited in Feldman, 1984).

Feldman (1984) explains four ways for development of most norms:

- Explicit statements by supervisors or coworkers,
- Critical events in the group's history,
- Primacy, and
- Carry over behaviors from past situations.

Also, McMahan and Wright (1990, as cited in McMahan and Kacmar, 1991) have added task and task rewards to the factors influencing the formation of norms.

Similarly, Feldman (1984) has explained the enforcement of norms. Norms are likely to be enforced,

- If they facilitate group survival.
- If they simplify, or make predictable, what behavior is expected of group members.
- If they help the group avoid embarrassing interpersonal problems.
- If they express the central values of the group and clarify what is distinctive about the group's identity.

The study of norms can be approached in different ways. Perhaps, an interesting way would be to consider "individual norms" as compared to "group norms". The term 'norms' is generally used to refer to 'group norms', and 'norms' are supposed to be a group level entity in the existing research (Hoffman, 1957; Kiesler, 1963; Persson, 1976; Sheehan, 1979; Feldman, 1984; Bettenhausen and Murnighan, 1985; Munroe, Estabrooks, Dennis, and Carron, 1999; Heywood and Aas, 1999).

However, this may be a cultural aberration. Asian cultures, such as Indian culture, seem to provide clearer examples of individual norms, e.g. 'samskar'. These are norms that individuals evolve for themselves. Similar approaches seem to emerge from the western literature on self-leadership (Sims & Manz, 1996).

While 'group norms' represent the 'shared values' among a group of people, 'individual norms' represent the 'inviolable principles' of individuals. The explanations of conformity to norms based on fear of sanctions, role expectations, etc. emphasize the 'external demands' perspective, while the conformity based on individual commitment emphasizes the 'internal commands' perspective.

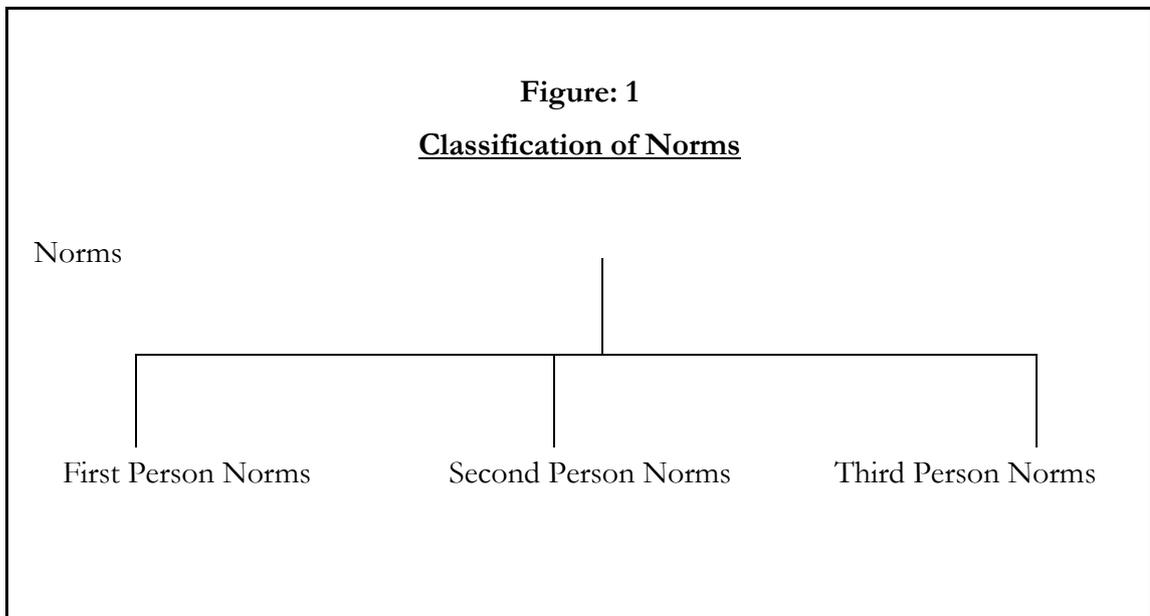
Classification

There are various classifications of norms in the existing literature. For example, Robbins (1989) classifies norms as:

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- Norms dealing with performance related processes
 - Norms encompassing appearance factors
 - Norms concerning informal social arrangements
 - Norms relating to allocation of resources

However, these classifications only address the ‘group’ norms or the ‘social’ norms. This perhaps is a western view. Therefore, in accordance with the discussion in the previous sections, and based on eastern cultures, we shall classify norms as follows:

- First person norms (FPN)
- Second person norms (SPN)
- Third person norms (TPN)



First Person norms are exemplified by “Sanskaar”, “Sheel’ , etc. (self-punishment, self-management, self-leadership) in the Indian culture. Sanskaar is the reaction produced in the mind by our actions. These are norms that an individual evolves for oneself. These cognitive and behavioral standards can be relatively stable, as can be inferred from research on stability of norms as well as cognitions (Myers and Robertson, 1974). These norms are perhaps similar to what Persson (1976) refers to when he says,“...by changing the group norms, the individual’s norms also change.” However, he has not explained his conceptualization on ‘individual’ norms.

Second Person norms are exemplified by norms of reciprocity, etc. These are norms that evolve in dyads. These norms are applicable to transactions between specific pairs of individuals.

Third Person norms are also referred to as ‘social norms’ (Bendor and Swistak, 2001). For the purpose of this essay, they also include ‘meta-norms’. Social norms refer to norms that are enforceable by third parties, i.e. individual ‘Z’ can enforce a transaction between individuals ‘P’ and ‘Q’. ‘Meta-norms’ refer to n^{th} person norms. They are clubbed into ‘social norms’ category along with third person norms, because they are expected to have similar implications for a researcher.

Conceptual Foundations

Group norms are accepted patterns of behavior. Thus, in case of ‘group influence’, the ‘conformity’ is with respect to the group norms. This approach is used by various researchers (e.g., Hornsey, Majkut, Terry, and Mckimmie, 2003).

As an individual disposition variable ‘conformity’ can be used to categorize individuals into ‘conformist’ individuals (CI) and ‘non-conformist’ individuals (NCI)². In general, ‘conformists’ (CI) are supposed to conform to others more readily than ‘nonconformists’ (NCI). This formulation is similar to Goldsmith and Matherly’s (1987) formulation for adaptation and innovation preferences as individual characteristics.

² Non-conformity is used here as a measure of change, with respect to group norms. This is explained below with some examples.

- If an individual displays behavior ‘X’, but changes to behavior ‘Y’ when others display behavior ‘Y’, he would be termed a conformist (CI).
- If an individual displays behavior ‘Y’, and continues to display behavior ‘Y’ when others display behavior ‘Y’, he would be termed a conformist (CI).
- If an individual displays behavior ‘X’, and continues to display behavior ‘X’ when others display behavior ‘Y’, he would be termed a non-conformist (NCI).

This discussion does not include the ‘negative’ connotation of ‘non-conformists’ (NCI) as explained below with an example.

- If an individual displays behavior ‘X’, but changes to behavior ‘Y’ when others display behavior ‘X’.

This ‘negative’ connotation is a theoretical possibility.

At a group level, ‘conformity’ may be used to characterize the proportion of individuals (members of the group) conforming to the ‘Group Norms’, and the degree of conformance exhibited by each group member. A future researcher may use any one of these criteria, or an appropriate combination of both. This dimension can be used for distinguishing a ‘Conforming Group (CG)’ from a ‘Non Conforming Group (NCG)’.

Thus, we are now in a position to identify any individual as either a CI, or an NCI. Similarly, any group can be either a CG, or an NCG. This constraint of categorization into only two categories reduces the possibilities and makes a simple analysis possible, as is done in later section.

It should be noted that this bifurcation represents two extremes. Individuals in real life may be representing any point on this continuum. This bifurcation is useful for analysis purposes. Also, any researcher can bifurcate individuals and groups using these dimensions, by using appropriate levels of differentiation between both the categories. The result of this analysis is not expected to be affected by the choice of the point of bifurcation. Thus, any classification of individuals and groups into the conforming and non-conforming categories based on measurements along the suggested dimensions can be used for this purpose.

Conformity

Given these conceptualizations, let us explore the possibilities in a three-member group.³ For simplicity of analysis, we assume that there is a single relevant behavioral (or cognitive) dimension, with behavioral (or cognitive) options that are ‘non-conforming’ with each other. We can call these behavioral (or cognitive) options ‘A’ and ‘B’. It is assumed that the ‘first behaviors’ of each member are displayed simultaneously. Also, the term ‘behavior’ in the following discussion includes ‘cognition’.

Case 1: All three members are CIs.

³ The author has chosen a three-member group for this analysis as it is assumed to be easier to analyse group with lesser members. Starting from zero, without individuals there is nothing to observe. With one individual there is no ‘group’, with two individuals, we can study ‘conformity’, but in case they do not conform to each other, we would be unable to identify a ‘Group Norm’. With three individuals, even if one individual does not conform to others, the majority can be assumed to be representing the ‘Group Norm’.

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- ⌚ Thus, they would be expected to conform to whatever behaviors (or cognitions) are displayed by the other two members of the group. This will lead to a 'CG'.

Case 2: Two members are CIs & one member is NCI.

- ⌚ If first behaviors of all three members conform, they continue as a CG.
- ⌚ If the first behaviors of all members do not conform, then for some time an NCG will exist.
 - a. Eventually, both the CIs may conform to the NCI's behavior. The NCI's behavior becomes the 'Group Norm' and a CG is established.
 - b. If both the CIs continue conforming to each other and not the NCI, the CI's behavior is the group norm and an NCG continues.

Case 3: One member is CI and two members are NCIs.

- ⌚ If both NCIs conform in their first behaviors, the CI will conform to it, and a CG results.
- ⌚ If both NCIs do not conform to each other, the CI's behavior conforms to one of them and becomes the group norm. In this case as NCG continues.

Case 4: All three members are NCIs.

- ⌚ If first behaviors of all three members conform, they continue as a CG.
- ⌚ If the behaviors of all three members do not conform, the behavior of the two conforming members is the group norm. They continue as an NCG.

It is argued that if CG emerges, it is expected to continue. However, in case of NCG, group pressures for conformance would be triggered. Whether conformity in a group will be achieved or not is dependent, among other things, on the composition of the group (in terms of proportion of CIs and NCIs), as well as the first behaviors displayed by each member of the group.

This analysis can now be extended to include another consideration. Let us now study individuals in three member groups with two behavioral (or cognitive) dimensions (instead of a single dimension). We shall call these behavioral dimensions ‘M’ and ‘N’.

This assumption brings us closer to reality. In real life, the individual behaviors may be along various dimensions.

Also, it is often assumed that the groups may be formed because of conformity on one dimension, and the formation may lead to conformity on other dimensions (owing to group influences, including norms). This partly addresses the causality debate of conformity and group formation. The emphasis on the individual actor rather than specific factors is supported by Macy and Willer (2002).

Thus, if individuals conform on behavioral dimension ‘M’, this may lead to formation of a group. This group formation may subsequently lead to ‘Group Norms’ for behavioral dimension ‘N’.

This again assumes that the groups are formed ‘naturally’. However, if a researcher or a teacher forms the groups, there may be no conformity even before the group is formed.

In such cases, if no ‘Group Norms’ are formed about any behavioral dimensions (‘M’ or ‘N’), no ‘group’ exists. It is just a crowd of individuals. This is because of a lack of ‘group identity’ that can lead to low group cohesiveness in such ‘concocted groups’.

This reinforces McGrath’s (1986) argument for the need to specify the ‘type of groups’ (i.e. real or concocted) being researched.

Also, this is the underlying assumption generally used for empirical and experimental research on group norms and conformity.

Conformity: Individual Perspective

‘Conformity’ as an individual dispositional variable, generally assumes consistency in behavior, and implies ‘conformity’ with past behaviors.

In this sense, ‘conformity’ as an individual dispositional variable probably reflects the individual’s use of a personal ‘frame of reference’, whereas ‘conformity’ as a group variable refers to an individual’s use of a shared (group) ‘frame of reference’.

This would mean that ‘conformity’ as the individual variable reflects the individual’s preference between his ‘personal norms’ (first person norms) and ‘Group Norms’ (Second or Third person norms).

These first, second and third person norms may be consistent or contradictory to each other. It is in prioritizing them that the ‘individual disposition’ of ‘conformance’ or ‘nonconformance’ is inferred. This individual perspective may provide a basis to integrate the inter-group perspective (Smith, 1989) with the prevalent group perspective.

This perspective to the study of conformity and norms has not been emphasized in the existing research literature.

Implications

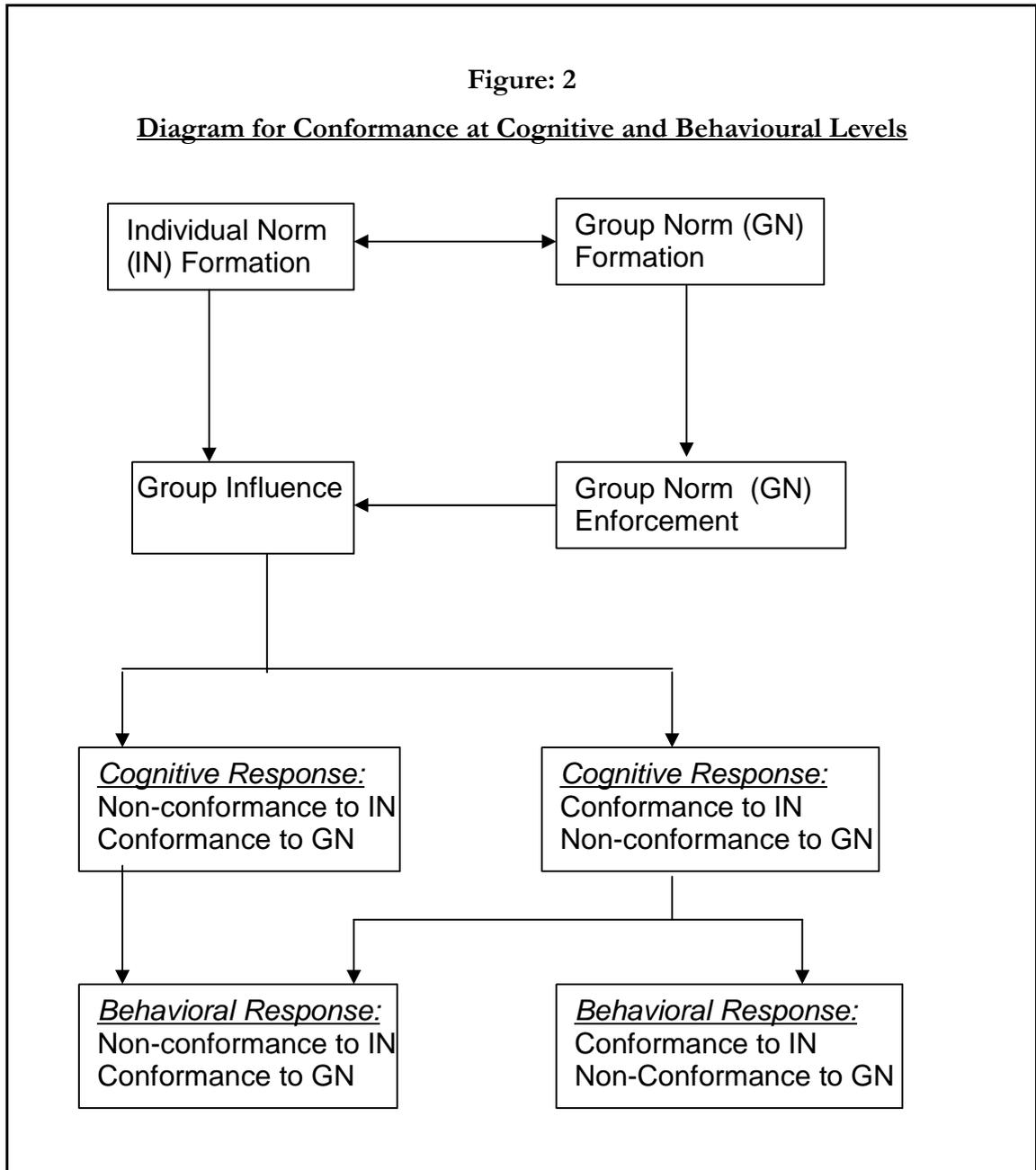
Using this approach to the study of conformity and norms can have important implications for managers and academicians. Organizations emphasize conformity to ‘organizational norms’, and expect employee conformance. The new perspective indicates that these issues can probably be addressed during the recruitment process.

One of the important implications for researchers is the possibility of having a ‘conforming group’ comprising of all ‘non-conforming individuals’ (exemplified by case 4 in previous sections). This provides for the existence of a ‘group’ that is found high on ‘conformity’, but has nothing ‘shared’ or ‘common’ among the group members.

Secondly, the necessity to study conformance at different levels (cognitive and behavioral) is highlighted by this approach (refer Figure 2). The individual norms formation is influenced by the group norms. These individual norms influence the group norms in subsequent groups. The group exerts influence over the individual for the enforcement of group norms. The individual then decides cognitively whether to conform or not. If he

cognitively conforms, he will display conformance behaviors. However, if he decides non-conformance to group norms, he may display conformance or non-conformance behaviors.

Researchers and academicians would generally be interested more in the conceptualization and the empirical support for this framework. Some of these issues are discussed in the next section.



Future Research

It is therefore useful to draw upon the existing research related to taxonomy of norms, to better understand the nature of norms. There is a need for researchers to focus on first person and second person norms. There seems to be a possibility of variation in the nature and intensity of the first person, second person and third person norms between various cultures. Further, there is a lack of theoretical conceptualization and rigorous study of first person norms in the existing literature.

Future research can focus on better conceptualization of norms. Researchers may also study through empirical research whether individuals differentiate or cognitively categorize norms into these categories. Also, this should probably be studied in different cultural contexts, because cultural contexts may not only influence the categorization of norms, but also their prioritization.

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