

published as:

Siegwart Lindenberg (2005), in: Veugelers, W., Bosman, M.H. (Eds.) (2005), *De strijd om het curriculum* (pp.85-107). Antwerpen/Apeldoorn: Garant

## Smart norms. How do they work and does the school have an important function for making them work?

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### Introduction

What is the matter with social norms? Seemingly there is a problem. For example, in the Netherlands, the number of people arrested for violent crimes greatly increased in recent times, especially for minors. The same holds for arrests for vandalism and disturbing the piece (SCP, 2000). The Dutch also react accordingly. In 1968, 34% thought that morality and behavior are deteriorating. In 1998 this percentage has grown to 69% (Van den Brink 2004,p. 192). Also, the value orientations of the Dutch have changed a great deal in the last decades. For example, the percentage of people with a self-reported materialistic value orientation (putting a premium on career, money and safety) increased from 53 per cent in 1979 to over 60 per cent in the year 2000. Even more dramatically, the percentage of people with a hedonistic value orientation (with emphasis on enjoying life and experiencing new things) steadily increased from 56 per cent in 1997 to 74 per cent in the year 2000 (see Felling 2004). This fits well with the Durkheimian notion that increasing individualism goes along with increasing materialism and hedonism. The knee-reflex response from policy makers in the Netherlands has often been in this vein as well: Let us go back to the values of order and respect for one another. If need be let a commission of wise people define what is and what is not acceptable behavior. The major culprit has often been identified as the parents, whose materialistic and hedonistic value orientation keeps them from paying proper attention to their children's upbringing. Schools say they are overwhelmed by having to do the job parents should have done in the first place.

There are problems with the evidence. Empirical findings on normative deterioration are equivocal (see WRR 2004). In this chapter, however, I will focus critically on the traditional explanations of how norms work and what the sources of problems with normative behavior are. I do this on the basis of new insights on motivational and cognitive processes which lead me to highlight the abstractness rather than the vagueness of norms. I come to the conclusion that we should concentrate on other policy measures than currently suggested, prominently measures that involve the schools (as training grounds for dealing with abstract norms ("smart norms"), not as substitute parents).

### Durkheim: vagueness of abstractness?

Ever since Durkheim's book on suicide (Durkheim 1951 [1897]), sociologists have been fascinated by the idea that social norms in modern market societies become

increasingly vague or vanish and thus cease to regulate behavior in a vacuum of chronic anomie. Norm don't state anymore what should be done or not done or, if they do, they contradict each other; in many cases they even become a matter of personal taste or vanish altogether. As a consequence, the social bond is broken, society becomes excessively individualized etc. But there is also a different thesis on social norms in his earlier book on the division of labor (1964 [1893])<sup>1</sup>. As societies become larger (due to fusion between smaller societies), the social norms have to cover increasingly a larger diversity of people and circumstances and, as a consequence, they become more abstract. "They rule only the most general forms of conduct and rule them in a very general manner, saying what must be done, not how it must be done." And he goes on to say: "It has often been remarked that civilization has a tendency to become more rational and more logical. The cause is now evident."(op cit. p.289) This reminds us of Weber's thesis of increasing rationalization. The increasing abstractness of social norms invites a larger input from the individual in order to apply them; "the individual becomes more of an independent factor in his own conduct." (ibid. p.404) This conveys a very different view of individualization, even though it does not state how the individual deals with these abstract norms. Both theories by Durkheim are plausible and they need not be strictly contradictory. Still, sociologists have massively pursued only anomie and loss of the social bond, as did Durkheim himself. The bulk of sociological literature has followed him in that, making either critique of rampant individualism, lost social bonds, and vanishing community prominent items of discussion (see for example Coleman 1982 and Putnam 2000), or countering with the idea that anomie breeds new forms of social organization, social norms and social ties (for example Wellman et al 1988; Ellickson 1991; Wuthnow 1998)<sup>2</sup>. But what about the other theory? There clearly are signs of increasing abstractness at least of some important social norms. If all social norms were the product of reducing transaction costs, they would become more concrete as time goes on, because abstract social norms leave much leeway for interpretation and negotiation and thus increase rather than decrease transaction costs. For example, in traditional families, social norms about whose decision counts in case of divergent preferences among family members were very concrete and made for very low transaction costs. "Modern" social norms on family decision making are more abstract. They don't dictate a particular weight in the decision making and thus point to the necessity to negotiate and to consider each partner's preferences equally. Imagine a husband getting a good job offer in a different city and suggesting to his wife and children that they move. As Scanzoni and Szinovacz, who studied family decision making, observed: When "both partners held such traditional sex roles, it

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<sup>1</sup> See Lindenberg 1975 for a more extensive discussion of this rather neglected theory of Durkheim's.

<sup>2</sup> The fact that I try to push the other theory in this paper should not give the impression that I don't find the loss of the social bond questions important. To the contrary, we have two large projects running that deal with such issues. The first, called "The Future of Community" consists of five different sub-projects of which one developed the necessary measurement instruments and the other four traced the modern forms of community in neighborhoods, schools, local exchange trading systems and vacations. Another projects is called "The development of pro- and antisocial behavior" and it is embedded in a large prospective panel study (called TRAILS) on mental health and social development from pre-puberty (age 10) into young adulthood (age 25), run jointly with the medical faculty in Groningen.

didn't take long at all to work out a decision." By contrast, when they hold modern or mixed views on sex roles, "the processes of trying to work out a decision might take a long time indeed. They might also involve a great deal of anxiety, tension, anger, shouting, hostility, and perhaps even violence." (Scanzoni and Szinovacs 1980, p.25). What are the societal consequences of social norms becoming more abstract? Maybe they are just as interesting as those that would follow from anomie and loss of the social bond and maybe anomie and increasing abstractness interact in interesting ways with one another. How can we begin to trace what these consequences might be? I believe that we have to begin our search at a very fundamental place: Finding out the mechanism by which social norms govern behavior and then try to use this mechanism as a heuristic device to learn more about the possible consequences of abstract norms and what can be done about them, especially by schools. This beginning investigation into the role of schools must necessarily be quite modest.

Of course, there may be trends that decrease transaction costs. There is a class of social norms (often called "conventions" that regulate coordination problems, such as driving on the left or the right side). Abstract conventions (such as "watch out for the other") often don't work. There thus may be a trend towards more concrete conventions. But even there, abstract social norms may dominate concrete conventions as when the abstract social norm "not to hurt others" may displace the concrete convention to stop at red and go at green in front of the traffic light at three o'clock in the morning with nobody around. If conventions become more concrete that is no reason to assume that all social norms become more concrete. To the contrary, there are good reasons to assume that social norms become more abstract (in part, as I will argue, by the disappearance of more concrete social norms that guard social privileges). This, however, will not be the major concern of the paper. Rather, the aim is to ask and answer as best I can the question how abstractness of norms influences behavior and what would follow from that for the role of the schools. In order to do this, we first have to answer the question how social norms actually work.

### How do social norms work?

Surprisingly, this question too has rarely been treated in any serious way. In the literature, we find basically two mechanisms through which norms supposedly regulate behavior. First, in the sociological literature, we find internalization of norms through a process of socialization. The assumption is that individuals learn "to want to do what they are socially expected to do." This process leads individuals to behave according to their internalized norms, because emotions of guilt and shame in case of non-conformity keep them in line. The other mechanism, mainly found in the economic and rational choice literature, focuses on social norms as restrictions emanating from rules of the game. Social norms inform the actor that certain kinds of action will meet with sanctions. Because actors are rational, they like to avoid sanctions. Surely, both mechanisms are important and they often have been combined in the sense that sanctions have been added to internalization and that internalization (in terms of learned preferences) have been added to the rational choice approach.

There is, however, an important puzzle. It seems that norms do not always work the same way. For one, there are differences between individuals in their sensitivity to guilt and shame and sanctions and in the way they think about norms (in terms of morality or in terms of constraints, see for example Sattler and Kerr 1991; Van Lange and Kuhlman 1994; De Dreu and Boles 1998). More importantly, even the same individuals show different sensitivities to these regulating forces and

think differently about norms in different situations. For example, people react strongly to goal instructions. Carnevale and Lawler (1986) found that when people were given the goal to act cooperatively, their thought processes (attitudes, judgment criteria and expectations) and behavioral repertoire (the perceived alternatives for action) were different than when the given goal was to act competitively. Seemingly, there is something more complex going on than conformity/nonconformity. When we have a look at theories of moral development, we would also expect that more is going on. For example, Kohlberg (1981) pointed to the importance of moral reasoning even for motivating compliance. This would mean that people can and generally will reach a stage in which they do not mechanically comply to norms or calculatingly avoid sanctions but in which they bring reasons and understanding to bear on normative behavior, for example by understanding complex causal sequences, the standpoint of the generalized other (role-taking), collective goods, and moral dilemmas. For example, stealing may be influenced by the answer a person gives to the question “why is it wrong to steal?” But how does reason enter into the mechanism by which norms govern behavior? How does it interact with emotions of guilt and shame and anticipation of sanctions? Theories of moral judgment and stages of development, such as Kohlberg’s, are not theories of action. For example, Kohlberg has been criticized for simply assuming that moral reasons will also motivate people to behave accordingly (see Nunner-Winkler 1997, Bergman 2002). Developmental theories say important things about moral aspects of behavior but do not tell us much about the mechanism by which norms regulate behavior. In order to find out more about this mechanism, I turn to recent developments that are grounded in framing theory.

## **Frames**

For the understanding of how social norms work, recent research that combines cognitive processes with motivational processes are most important. The upshot of this research is that cognitive processes of selective attention are governed by overriding goals. Thus, motivational aspects (goals) govern cognitive processes (selective activation) which then lead to behavior that, in turn, will directly or indirectly influence the goals (see Gollwitzer and Moskowitz 1996, Kruglanski, 1996). For example, if a person is set on making a profit in a particular interaction (the goal), he or she will “frame” the situation in such a way that the elements that are relevant for making a profit become salient as well. De Dreu and Boles (1998) found different guiding rules (heuristics) for behavior. For example, people in a cooperative orientation would use heuristics such as “equal split is fair”, whereas people with a competitive goal would use heuristics such as “your gain is my loss”, leading to very different behavior. Clearly, goals exert a considerably influence on a cognitive frame which, in turn, determines what is perceived in a given situation, what things (memories, knowledge, categories) are being activated in a person’s mind, what criteria are being used for judgment, what the alternatives are and how they are ordered etc. The individual is thus more sensitive to some kinds of information than to others. How does it work?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This process has been worked out in some detail by Lindenberg (see Lindenberg 2001a and Lindenberg 2001b)

### *Foreground and background goals*

It seems, at any given moment, there is one overriding goal that takes center stage and that pushes other goals into the cognitive background. Once in the background, a goal is not completely sidelined. It will still influence the strength with which the goal in the foreground acts upon the choice of alternatives. The process might best be described by use of an example. A person visits his rich grandmother. If his overriding goal at the moment is to improve his monetary situation, he may perceive possibilities to influence her last will, he may be particularly charming to outperform his two cousins in getting her affection, he may impress her how needy and yet how deserving he is, etc. Yet, he may, in fact, care for his grandmother and the goal to express this caring, though pushed into the background, may prevent more extreme alternatives from being considered “feasible”. Thus, certain actions may be considered but just as quickly discarded, such as actually mentioning her will or taking steps to speed up the ongoing deterioration of her health just to get her to think of her will sooner and thereby allow him to influence her more directly. If his overriding goal at the moment is to help her deal with her worsening health, he is likely to think of very different things to do, such as observing that her bed needs supports for getting up and arranging that it is done, observing that she should have a beeper just in case she has an emergency, and having it arranged, seeing that she is in need to hear that there is hope the health situation will improve, and talking reassuringly with her, etc. In that case, the goal to improve one’s monetary situation (and thus to be well included in her will) is in the background, but as in the other case, it will also exert some influence from this background on the alternatives that are being considered. For instance, even though he is convinced that her health would be greatly helped if she stopped eating chocolates, he quickly dismissed the idea that he would make a big issue out of this against her angry resistance.

### **Master frames**

The most important overriding goals are probably few and well recognized in psychology, literature and daily experience. Elsewhere (see Lindenberg 2001a and 2001b), I have elaborated such “master frames” associated with them and called them hedonic frame, gain frame and normative frame<sup>4</sup>. In the *hedonic* frame, the overriding goal is “to improve the way one feels”. This is a goal directed at the short term. For example, a man comes home from his work, irritable, tired and hungry for some pleasant stimulation. His overriding goal at that moment might well be to improve the way he feels right here and now. Maybe a drink will help, a bit of television, a few flattering words from his wife (maybe how she thought of him all day during her work). The offer by a friend to join him for a lecture on Picasso is politely turned down, the offer by his wife that she cooks something special is gladly accepted, but it might not occur to him that he does not know and has not inquired how his wife feels, whether she is just as tired and in need of hearing something nice being said to her,

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<sup>4</sup> The reader will easily recognize a bow to Freud in these three master frames. However, Freud’s psychodynamic theory did not consider framing processes and thus the concepts of id, ego and superego cannot really be linked to the concepts of hedonic, gain and normative fame.

whether she would actually prefer going out and not having to cook etc. In all likelihood, a hedonic frame does not need socialization and training. People are born with this capability. This does not mean that socialization cannot heavily influence what makes one feel better. When people are in a hedonic frame, they treat norms from the point of view of how they are feeling at the moment. There is no deontic step involved. For example, they may agree or strongly agree to the following statements: “in a good mood, I am a better person”, or “there is no use thinking about how you behave if you don’t feel well or if you are sick.”

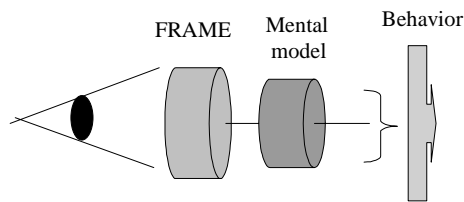
In the *gain* frame, the overriding goal is “to improve one’s scarce resources” (such as money or status or human capital). This is a goal directed at the longer term. Aside from the feeling of safety or achievement (see “normative” frame), the resources themselves only change the way one feels when they are used, not when they are acquired. For example, our person visiting his grandmother and having as an overriding goal to improve his monetary situation, is in a gain frame. People need some training and support to sustain a gain frame with its delayed gratification. When people are in a gain frame, they treat norms from the point of view of what it gets them. Again, there is no deontic step involved. There is no deontic step involved. For example, they may agree or strongly agree to the following statements: “I am quite willing to treat somebody well, if he treat me well”, or “I you have to get a job done, you cannot possibly take everybody’s interests into consideration.” The “calculating citizen”, often talked about in our times (see Veugelers 2003), is a person in a gain frame vis-à-vis normative expectations of others.

In the *normative* frame, the overriding goal is “to act appropriately”. There is no direct relation to the improvement of feeling or resources. In all likelihood, this goal is a universal achievement of universal practices of socialization in interaction with a genetic capability to internalize the expectations of relevant others. Adults (especially parents) everywhere have a regulatory interest to have their children behave a certain way (the way it is expected, the “right” way) even when they don’t watch. The person that does not just respond to external sanctions is universally created time and again early on in childhood. The mechanism that is probably connected with this is that the “self” (or one’s personal identity) becomes attached to the wish to do what is right, to act appropriately: “I don’t want to be somebody who does not care about doing what is right” (see Nunner-Winkler 1997; Bergman 2002; Kochanska 2002). This development is related to the development of feeling guilty when not doing what is right (see Kochanska et al. 2002). Normative frames are most easily triggered in situations that create a demand for normative regulation, namely situations of “joint production” or shared goals where people are interdependent with regard to outcomes and tasks leading to these outcomes. For example, a group that is responsible for a common product and in which members have to coordinate in order to achieve this goal will have an acute demand for normative regulation of behavior (see Lindenberg 1986). When people are in a normative frame, they treat norms from the point of view of what is appropriate for situation or the group as a whole. Again, there is no deontic step involved. There is a clear deontic step involved. For example, they may agree or strongly agree to the following statements: “If somebody is in need, I will help even if I don’t feel like it.” “I try as best I can to take others’ feelings into consideration.” The “calculating citizen”, often talked about in our times (see Veugelers 2000), is a person in a gain frame vis-à-vis normative expectations of others.

*What about internalization of norms*

It is obvious that the normative frame is important to our understanding how norms work. How does it differ from the “old” view of internalization? There are two crucial differences. First, in the traditional view of internalization in sociology, children learn to want to do what they have to do. They internalize social norms. From a framing point of view, this confounds two separate steps (see Figure 1). First, there is the question whether the person is or is not in a normative frame, i.e. whether selective activation is or is not governed by the goal “to act appropriately” (or “to do what is right”). Once in a normative frame, the second step for that person is to find out what behavior is appropriate in the given situation (by means of a mental model, see below). Of course, when norms are clear and concrete, the two steps can be so smoothly routinized that they subjectively seem to be only one step. This explains why it has often been maintained that moral behavior characterized by following an imperative, by not choosing between alternatives. As we will see, however, it is very important to decompose this two-step process in order to understand how social norms work. Even though researchers of moral development generally do not use framing theory (they are not concerned with a theory of action nor with cognitive mechanisms per se), there is some indication that many of them actually also work with two steps. For example, Kohlberg has used the term ‘deontic judgment’ meaning that before moral reasoning sets in, one first has to decide do act morally for the sake of acting morally (see Kohlberg and Candee 1984). Of course, contrary to Kohlberg, a frame is assumed not to be chosen by a person at the moment. Rather, it belongs to the category of automatic processes like going to sleep. One can choose settings that make it more or less likely that a normative frame (just like sleep) will impose itself.

**Figure 1** Schematic view of framing with mental model



But there is agreement with Kohlberg on the two stages and on the deontic nature of the first step. Nunner-Winkler even comes closer to the framing view. She makes a difference between the development of sociocognitive understanding and the growth of moral motivation. The first actually often develops earlier in children, and the second “requires a commitment to the moral domain, making morality an important personal concern, a ‘personal project’, a core element of identity.” (Nunner-Winkler 1997, p.602). The latter she calls “deontic concern”, as the goal to do the right thing for its own sake and contrasts this with empathy as a motivation for, say, helping. I will shortly deal more explicitly with the second step under the heading of “mental

model”, but first I would like to present a second important difference between the traditional view of internalization and the framing approach to the way social norms work.

### *Intrinsic motivation*

From a framing point of view, it is important to keep in mind that there are goals that are pushed into the background but are nonetheless influential for behavior (see the section above that deal with this influence). Even if people are in a normative frame, their behavior can be influenced by hedonic and gain-related goals in predictable ways. A normative frame must be supported by many *compatible* hedonic and/or gain-related goals in the background in order to withstand the influence of contrary hedonic and gain-related goals. Among the most important compatible background goals is, as we have discussed, the wish to affirm one’s self-identity, or, to say it differently, the wish to approve of one’s own actions and avoid feelings of guilt. Second, there is the wish to get approval and avoid disapproval from others (avoid feelings of shame). Third, there is the goal to be materially rewarded and to avoid negative sanctions. In other words, the background goals may represent what has been seen in sociological and economic literature all the way along as important factors for norm conformity. In that sense, “intrinsic” motivation to act normatively (Nunner-Winckler’s deontic concern) can be stabilized by extrinsic rewards and punishments (see Lindenberg 2001b). What’s more, without such stabilization, the normative frame may not hold up or “leak” too much of the *contrary* background goals into the actual choice of behavior. In what way is this behavior then driven by an ‘intrinsic’ normative motive? How can we possibly speak of deontic concern? The answer is that what is intrinsic or deontic about a normative frame is the fact that the cognitive processes are first and foremost governed by the overriding goal to do what is right, *without* any weighing of that goal against gain-related or hedonic goals. There is no calculus involved that would make moral action the most efficient one (see Lindenberg 1983, 2001b, Schuyt 2004). The goals in the background have some influence, but they are nonetheless in the background and they are not involved in the deliberation process. Subjectively, the moral choice is the more completely deontic the higher the salience of the normative frame. As we will see later, this does not imply that the choice is necessarily subjectively “surer”.

For the same reason, given framing effects and the possibility of abstract norms, we cannot simply infer from behavior that somebody did or did not act normatively. For example, not stopping at a red light is not necessarily a sign of anomie. For example, for a young person for whom a major social norm is “don’t harm others”, it will not be difficult to figure out what to do at 3 o’clock in the morning when he comes to a red traffic light. There are no cars anywhere, there are no pedestrians who could all of a sudden jump on the street, no bicycles. The decision within a normative frame is thus: go through the red light, they should have turned off the traffic lights anyway. A person of the older generation who has grown up with fairly concrete norms, this situation would not be different from standing in front of a red light in full traffic. The decision is clear: stop until the light is green. Only if the gain frame displaces the normative frame (say, due to being in a great hurry), would this older person go through the red light, possibly feeling bad. The sociological observer (looking at the traffic at 3 o’clock in the morning from a window), counting cars that stop and cars that don’t stop and having a look at the age of the driver, might

come to the conclusion that the younger generation is not guided by norms any more, confirming the state of anomie.

### **Mental models**

It is time to get to the second step of the process of norm-directed behavior. Once there is a normative frame (which consists of the overriding goal to act appropriately or, what amounts to the same thing: to do what is right), the question arises what kind of behavior is appropriate or “right” in this situation. This answer does not come from the frame itself but from a mental model of the normative aspects of the situation. This mental model may be about a relationship (such as friendship) or typical occasion (such as a funeral) and it contains information on important questions that may arise from the fact that the overriding goal is too abstract to act upon. The term ‘mental model’ is used in many different ways (see Collins and Gentner 1987) but its basic connotation, quite common to many definitions, is some kind of mental representation that guides reasoning and action. A subcategory of mental models is prototypes. For example, the prototype of a relationship can be used to answer the question “if this is a friendship relationship, what should I do?” Such a model may be taken to consist of six minimal elements. First, there is a set of rules about one’s own and the other’s behavior; second, there are expectations about the other’s behavior based on these rules; third, there are the others’ surmised expectations; fourth, there are normative expectations about one’s own behavior; fifth, there is co-orientation about the expectations (Scheff, 1967), meaning that each partner in a relationship assumes that the other uses the same mental model; and finally, there are reasons for the rules. For example, the mental model of a friendship relationship could look like this: “*Rules of friendship*: friends are equals; friends don’t do anything that would increase the social difference between them; friends don’t harm each other; friends help each other in need. *Expectation about other’s behavior*: the other is my friend and thus he will behave according to the rules of friendship. *Expectations from the other*: the other is my friend and he expects me to act according to the rules of friendship. *Normative expectations* about own behavior: I am his friend and I am expected to behave according to the rules of friendship. *Co-orientation*: I assume that both I and the other have the same mental model about a friendship relationship and know that we do. *Reasons for the rules*: the mental model is likely to contain also reasons why it is so important to follow the rules (in this case, say, help a friend in need). They can be all sorts of reasons, instrumental, moral, and social. The mental model for a typical occasion would similarly contain information about the rules and the descriptive and normative expectations. The mental model of a prototype is thus more than just a social norm about how to behave. It minimally also includes descriptive and normative expectations, co-orientation, and often also reasons for rules. The interlocking of expectations through co-orientation is especially important for understanding the force with which norms govern sequences in social interaction.

#### *Mental models and frames*

Mental models work in conjunction with frames. They answer questions generated by frames. However, it is also immediately obvious that they can link up to different frames. For example, an impostor who wants to go to funerals in order to steal wallets

while people stand in grief and cry, will use the same mental model of the prototypical funeral, but he links it to a gain frame. In this way, it is also possible that children seem to be able to understand moral rules and still only follow these rules “when they feel like it”, i.e. from a hedonic frame (see Nunner-Winkler 1997, p.601). What’s more, it may indicate that if norm conformity goes down, it may have nothing to do with increasing vagueness of social norms but with the fact that hedonic frames have become relatively more frequent than they used to be.

When we distinguish between a normative frame and the mental model, we can identify right away two different influences of the subjective experience of acting morally. First, when norms contained in the mental model are concrete, the salience of the normative frame will determine the subjective experience. When the salience of the frame is very high, the choice of the “best” alternative is so certain that, subjectively, there is no “choice”, there is just one course of action. For example, when confronted with a woman who has great difficulty lifting her suitcase into the train, we may spontaneously rush to help, without any deliberation. However, when our arm hurts, the wish to avoid pain (in the cognitive background) will lower the salience of the normative frame, and we become more deliberate, maybe looking around to draw somebody else’s attention to this case. Still the conviction that this woman needs to be helped is clear. For moral behavior this means that when norms are clear and concrete, people will often have the intuition that the very essence of moral behavior is its imperative quality, that no “calculations” about which alternative to choose are involved (see for example Etzioni 1988, p.42). However, when the norms in the mental model are abstract, then even though the normative frame is salient, the situation feels much more uncertain. Considering the norm “not to harm the other”, we may not just think of helping but even entertain the possibility that the woman might feel patronized if helped. In order to act normatively in such a situation, we need to read more cues and do it faster than when norms are concrete. As I will argue below, this needs training and the attention of schools.

### Why might norms become more abstract? The rise of “smart norms”

Durkheim surmised that it is increasing heterogeneity that makes norms more abstract because they have to cover more heterogeneous situations. This does sound very plausible, although I don’t know of any empirical study to corroborate it. Yet, there is something else. From casual empiricism, I would venture the guess that it is especially in Western countries that norms have become more abstract. The question would be: why? In order to answer this question, it is useful to point to two different sources of norms. First, social norms arise in situations of joint production, i.e. in groups of people who have common purposes. Second, rules are created by powerful groups in order to maintain privileges. These rules become norms if the powerful succeed in linking them with “joint production”, making people believe that they serve the common purpose. This is known as the process of legitimation (“might becomes right”). It is the latter norms that are especially concrete because they safeguard concrete aspects of privilege and discourage explicit questions about purpose (for example, dress code, certain gestures of deference and respect, like bowing, not speaking until spoken to, not making a decision until having gotten permission). Because these privilege norms are backed by power, they dictate the “style” of norms in general (including pure joint production norms). For example, red light means stop, green light means go. “No ifs and buts”.

It is a longstanding Western tradition to keep gnawing away at norms that establish privilege (or, what is the other side of the coin, legitimize discrimination). At first, it may have been privileges of kings and rulers that were deemed illegitimate, then of the aristocracy, then of masters of serfs, then men versus women, then of ethnic groups, then adults versus children, then handicapped versus non-handicapped etc. Political correctness is the expression of a long process of withdrawal of legitimacy of privilege and discrimination. This must have had direct consequences for the abstractness of social norms. As mentioned above, social norms that code privilege and discrimination must be quite concrete and as such have the advantage of reducing transaction costs because they clearly pinpoint who should yield to whom. Yet despite its consequence for increasing transaction costs, reduction in privilege kept going and probably was greatly aided by increasing markets for which privileges meant irrational barriers. Conventions (such as driving on the right side) can be very concrete but pure joint production norms that cover heterogeneous individuals and groups and don't allow for privilege must be abstract enough to mitigate negative externalities in all these circumstances.

A central hypothesis is that this development leaves only three highly abstract social norms that govern the *general* interaction between people and which possibly express the values dear to members of Western societies (the general value of the worthiness of human beings, and of their autonomy and equality in particular):

- (1) "under normal circumstances the individual (or the dyad) have priority over the group",
- (2) "under normal circumstances, not harming others has priority over other obligations, such as helping" and
- (3) "don't claim privilege" (i.e. only "earned" social differences are legitimate).

Nunner-Winkler (2000) has done research that provides empirical support for this hypothesis. Additional support comes from the Dutch findings (Felling 2003) that, (a) materialist and hedonist value orientations are increasingly correlated with criticism of a society that allows privileges, and that (b) various religious and secular ideologies that might be used to support privileges are losing influence, except in the Islamic population (see Van den Brink 2004, p.115).

This does not mean that norms of solidarity have vanished but that they have become subsidiary to the more negatively stated highly abstract norms. For example, curtailing individual expression in the name of group solidarity must be accompanied by arguments of exceptional circumstances (such as a crisis). Similarly, positive obligations must rest on mutual agreement. Helping others is thus either related to an exceptional situation (a crisis) or to a bilateral agreement. Helping simply because one thinks the other needs it may be met with social disapproval and interpreted as "meddling".

### **Smart norms**

These abstract norms may be called "smart norms" because they need much personal intelligent effort to being applied to concrete situations, as opposed to norms that can be applied mechanically. The reason that these norms are negatively phrased might be that Western societies have turned into societies of "weak" solidarity (see Lindenberg 1998) in "normal" times, with ingroup/outgroup differences smoothed over (along with the privileges or discrimination that went along with them), and that they revert back to strong solidarity (with a primacy of positively stated norms) only in times of

national crisis. Weak solidarity is only possible thanks to network of social and legal institutions that prevent the emergence of strong group boundaries. This is an important point for the workings of smart norms but for reasons of space, I will not go into this aspect here (see Lindenberg 1992 die more detail).

Of course this is not the whole story. There are concrete social norms left, such as (.....reader, fill in). However, by and large, a case can be made that with legitimate privilege having been driven out so thoroughly, abstract norms are strongly on the rise, including discussions on victimless crimes, on squatters' rights, on the controversy about social etiquette as reinforcing privileges, etc. Maybe the enormous clash between Western countries and the Islam in the present time seems first and foremost a clash of systems of norms in which privileges are not legitimate against those in which they are (see Inglehart and Norris 2003). It might well be not about religion at all. If that is true then the integration of Muslims into Western countries should focus on contexts in which Muslims are drawn into joint production with "non-believers" so that joint contexts of demand for social norms come into existence. The joint context will create similar demands. This will not solve all conflicts but might do better than to do the opposite, namely to exclude Muslims from joint production and drive them into groups in which norms of privilege are taken for granted.

Veugelers (2003) distinguishes between a "conforming citizen" who finds law and order more important than autonomy and a "critical-democratic citizen" who finds autonomy more important than law and order. In terms of the analysis here, both are people who approach norms from a normative frame. But the conforming citizen yearns for concrete norms and the critical-democratic citizen for abstract norms that allow nuance, circumstance and room for personal development. If norms becomes abstract, conforming citizens will become critical of the society and/or the government and they might joint subcultures (for example sects) in which they see their demand for concrete norms met. Others may turn into hedonic citizens who follow norms only when they feel like it. The general point of the analysis offered here is that for both the conforming and the hedonic citizen, training in the use of abstract norms in concrete situations is very important.

## Consequences for the parents, governments and schools

Because frames work with mental models and because both are being "triggered" by the environment, many parties are involved in the stimulation of norm-guided behavior. First, I briefly turn to parents and governments.

### **Parents and the government**

*Parents.* As mentioned above, the waning legitimacy of protecting privilege by norms makes it mandatory for parents not to use an authoritarian style of socialization. However, what else they should do can be sketched more sharply due to the difference between frames and mental models. When norms are very concrete, it is likely that socialization is mainly a matter of internalizing these norms. Frame and mental model are virtually identical. When norms are more abstract, learning to have a normative frame and learning various mental models become two different achievements of socialization. From all we know about socialization, parents have the best leverage to teach the child to have a normative frame in situations that ask for a "moral" response (i.e. in terms of this paper: in situations in which joint production or

sharing is prominent). It is of course an empirical question whether or not parents failed to have instilled a normative frame. At present, nobody knows the right answer to that because so far research has only been done on the basis of internalization of norms. There is a good likelihood, however, that most parents did instill such a frame because their own regulatory interest makes them put effort into achieving this goal. Even though the motivation may be less than in former times, due to reduced externalities of children's behavior on parents (see Lindenberg 1986), there is likely an increased success rate due to a change in socialization away from power-assertive discipline and love-withdrawal towards more inductive ways which focus on the combination of doing what is right and also on having good reasons to do it (see Kochanska 2002). The inductive style is more likely to link moral behavior to the self and thus to an important support for a normative frame (see above).

The internalization of the goal "to act appropriately" in situations of joint production works best in young years (see Kochanska 2002). Because as they get older, children will have to use increasingly their own judgment in order to figure out what the most appropriate course of action is, parents would do well to start early on to treat even concrete norms as situational specifications of more abstract norms by providing *reasons* that link the concrete norm to an abstract norm. For example, if the child is told that one does not spit on the floor, it could be linked immediately with the more abstract norms concerning the welfare of others and the sharing of living space (not harming others). Failure of parents to create well-behaved children (in the sense of following concrete norms) was formerly seen as a failure of parents to teach children to respect adult privilege. Yet, from the point of view of smart norms, parents' success or failure in socialization should mainly be judged in terms of the child's ability to get into a normative frame when the situation is clearly one of joint production or sharing.

*The government.* The ability to recognize a situation in public as one's of joint production or sharing depend to no small degree on what the government does in this area. How the public arena is profiled by the government. For example, behavior by the government itself can be blatantly opportunistic, say setting quotas for policemen concerning the number of traffic violators they have to book, or treating influential people with a permissive eye, while cracking down on the powerless. This is likely to draw individuals into a gain frame. There is no good reason the government can give for such behavior that relates to joint production or sharing. Measures taken by the government and laws given by parliament need to be much more transparent about their aims than in a country with concrete norms. A special effort must be taken to give good reasons, i.e. to show how these measures and laws concretize abstract social norms. In order to encourage the perceptions of joint production and sharing, the government would also have to encourage participation from the smallest unit in neighborhoods, to communities, all the way up to the national level. Referenda seem to be an important means for increasing the feeling of joint production (see Frey 1997, p.45ff), and thus a good start to improve prosocial behavior.

### *Schools*

Much thought has gone into the question what schools can do about norms and values (for recent Dutch views see WRR 2003;216ff; Diekstra et al. 2004. Van den Brink 2004). I don't have the space to review these often very valuable suggestions. Instead, what I have offered above is a relatively clear theoretical basis for thinking about links between schools and normative behavior against which existing and future

suggestions could be evaluated. Below, I derive a few first suggestions from this theoretical basis.

Schools can more easily contribute to an increase in norm-guided behavior if parents have done their share with regard to normative framing and the government its share with regard to the public arena as joint production, sharing, and example. Schools are the ideal place where young people can acquire the knowledge, the attitudes, the skills and habits to deal successfully with smart norms. The reason for this is that smart norms require much cognitive training, the job schools are best equipped to do. With norms becoming more abstract, moral behavior can no longer be characterized as following an imperative, as “not weighing alternatives” (see Etzioni 1988, p.42). Normative behavior and “rational” behavior overlap much more when norms have become abstract.

One way to see what this merging of normative and reasoned behavior might imply for the school curriculum is to realize that there is increasing leeway of personal convictions. If guarding privileges is not a major source of social norms any more, regulatory interests in the informal sphere have declined as well. Following social norms, especially translating abstract norms to concrete situations, thus gives much more room for personal convictions and ideologies. They need to be addressed and because the more “personal convictions” of pupils are informed by knowledge, the smaller the chance that they will interfere with the functioning of smart norms. What kind of knowledge would be most important? Of course, I cannot possibly present a worked out curriculum here. But a few key ingredients in any future curriculum can be identified, and given the subject matter, they have a strong behavioral and social science content. Needless to say, there are curricula that do contain already a good deal of one or the other aspect.

Key issues for the school are three things. First, the importance of recognizing situations involving other people as situations of “*joint production*” (common purpose or shared public space etc) rather than as situations of intrusion into private space (irritation, provocation etc). It is especially situations that are recognized as joint production that trigger a normative frame. Second, the importance of knowledge necessary for *translating the abstract norm into concrete action* (see below). Third, *training empathy* as a skill. To a certain degree, perspective taking (i.e. seeing things through the perspective of others) is always important for smooth social functioning (Tomasello 1999). However, when norms are shared and concrete, perspective taking (empathy) is not essential for knowing what to do. With abstract norms, the situation is very different. We cannot translate them smoothly into concrete action without putting ourselves into the shoes of the other in order to find out how we can avoid hurting the other (not just keeping general dignity but being sensitive to special circumstances of the other, such as a recent loss, recent failure or success etc). Training in perspective taking is thus one of the most important tasks for schools with regard to smart norms.

### *Knowledge*

Given that values in our society prominently contain equality in dignity and strong interdependence, the abstract norm “not to hurt others” is likely to be one of the most important imperatives (see Nunner-Winkler 2000). In order to be able to make this smart norm more concrete in a given situation, one would have to know what might hurt the other. Given the heterogeneity in our society in terms of ethnic groups and subcultures, it is by no means trivial to know what might hurt the other.

- ◆ One important area of knowledge one would have to have is a general understanding of how the physical, social and psychological wellbeing of human beings depends on the behavior of others. This includes knowledge of general human goals and knowledge about the variety and function of human emotions. What is the significance of the fact that human beings need to have their actions and opinions validated, that they want to distinguish themselves, that they need affection, stimulation and also security and a feeling of belonging? What is the role of emotions related to these goals and needs? Why are people so sensitive to status-degrading experiences? How can evolutionary psychology help us understand the variety of emotions, such as anger, fear, and tenderness in relation to the interaction with others?
- ◆ What developmental aspects are important to know? Does a person of 15 have other general goals than a person of 40? What is the role of identity from the point of view of development? How does it depend on group membership and individual phase in the life course?
- ◆ Different subcultures and ethnic groups have different customs with which they reach the general human goals and satisfy the general human needs. What are they? How deeply engrained are they? What makes some customs more engrained than others, so that going against them hurts the other more than with less engrained customs?
- ◆ What is important to know in one's own society about trends in increasing heterogeneity of groups, in potential conflicts between groups, in areas of joint production and sharing among these groups? What are the important features of individualization and how do they affect the way people behave towards each other. What are "smart norms" and why would a student have to learn so much about wellbeing, emotions and others in order to function well in this society?
- ◆ Why is empathy so important in an individualized society? How can it be trained?
- ◆ Why is it so important to recognize jointness in production and sharing in daily life? How can it be recognized? How can the recognition be trained?

### *Forum*

Given that personal convictions and ideologies are getting more legitimacy, and given that if personal convictions remain idiosyncratic they will impede the use of smart norms, it is important that students are trained in debating their personal convictions, trying to convince others, and likely use arguments they derive from the knowledge part of their education. Familiarity with philosophical and ethical arguments become very important as input into such fora. For example, the abstract norms against privilege and not hurting others imply that I should treat the other as I think the other should treat me (reciprocity and dignity). Add autonomy to that and it is clear that I could have to not just claim it but grant it. The various freedoms guaranteed in the Dutch constitution are completely compatible with this view.

### *Training*

The curriculum would also have to have a concrete training part that focuses on "hands on" training in the use of smart norms in all kinds of situations. Such training includes communicative skills and skills that help the individual to hold on to a normative frame in the face of provocation or gain and hedonic frames, but most of all

the skill to apply the knowledge about the important aspects of others' wellbeing (and thus also to empathy). This skill can be trained in scenario settings and role play, and make explicit use of what has been achieved in the knowledge parts of the education. This also has implications for school levels. The lower the school level, the more effort there should be to train the use of smart norms explicitly since it will be more difficult to students to establish this on their own.

People with framing disabilities should get special help. Such disabilities consist of difficulties to switch flexibly between frames. For example, if a person is unable to hold a normative frame due to an attention disorder, that person will be lost in a world in which a frame he cannot handle is linked to abstract norms he does not know what to do with. In such cases, curricula should be developed to approximate norm-guided behavior with a "socially positive" hedonic frame, where affection and attachment creates the search for prosocial behavior.

## Conclusion

Durkheim has introduced the idea that social norms in modern societies may become so vague that we cease to be governed by norms and slide into an ever-increasing abyss of anomie. Of course there are many sociologists who have argued against that, but it is fair to say that this theory has had center stage in sociology every since its inception more than a hundred years ago. There is another theory by Durkheim, equally interesting, namely that norms do not become increasingly vague or vanish but that they become increasingly abstract, asking more intelligent effort from the individual to apply them to the concrete situation. Interestingly, Durkheim dropped this theory, not explicitly but by simply shifting all his attention to anomie. Probably he did not know how to deal with the combination of norm-governed behavior and individuals' discretion in deciding how to follow the abstract norms. Can behavior involving discretion still be "moral" behavior? I argue in this paper that not just Durkheim but sociology in general was ill equipped to deal with this problem as long as we held on to the standard view of internalized norms. In the meantime, cognitive and motivational research, and research in child and moral development has advanced considerably, allowing us a very different view on how norms govern behavior. This view, making use of framing theory, was discussed at some length and then applied to the question how increasingly abstract norms affect behavior and what these increasingly abstract norms are likely to be. The upshot of the paper is that there is a two-step process involved in the way social norms influence behavior. The first step consists of the mobilization of an overriding goal "to act appropriately" or, what is the same, "to do what is right". This goal creates selective cognitive processes, called a "frame". This first step implies that normative behavior is first and foremost behavior that attempts to realize the goal "to act appropriately". However, the frame does not specify what action is appropriate. The answer to this question is governed by a mental model on descriptive and normative expectations in a given situation. Social norms in the mental model can be more abstract or quite concrete. If they are concrete, then the first and second step seem to blend into one. But if the norm is abstract, then the individual still has to go through the effort of finding ways in which the abstract social norm can be applied in the given situation. For example, if the abstract social norm is not to harm others, then it is often not obvious at all what behavior has to be avoided in order not to harm others. Moral behavior is then not characterized by following an imperative but by weighing alternative, using good reasons and a wide range of information. Individualization may thus not be

necessarily accompanied by anomie even when people seemingly behave “instrumentally” in situation in which they would have followed a moral imperative in the past. The important point here is that by decomposing the process by which norms govern behavior, it becomes clear that people can act normatively (frame) and still have much discretion about their own behavior (when the norms in the mental model are abstract). Yet, this process often requires much information and skills, so that moral education becomes much more linked up with social sciences expertise than ever before. The individual needs good reasons to translate an abstract norm in one way or another. In the family and pre-school education, moral education would consist especially in having the child learn to automatically mobilize the goal “to act appropriately” in situations in which joint production with others (in any form) is called for. It would also consist of the insight that it may take some searching to find the most appropriate way to act and the willingness to do so. In school, the required curriculum would have to include prominently knowledge and skills (such as empathy) necessary to “translate” abstract norms into concrete behavioral alternatives in a given situation. For the government this also implies a change in the way governmental action is legitimized: a high degree of transparency and of the provision of good reasons, low degree of simple imposition. In addition, the government would have to come up with a clearly inclusive policy towards minorities (in schools, in the language used to talk about them, in the way they are treated by officials etc) in order make them and the native Dutch perceive most mutual encounters as situations of joint production. Strong ingroup/outgroup dynamics block norm-guided behavior across group boundaries and it will increase the difference in norms between groups.

Why then have important social norms become more abstract in Western societies? My tentative answer is: Because over the centuries it has become increasingly illegitimate to guard privileges via social norms. The social norms that coordinate behaviors, such as driving on the left, often called conventions, are likely to stay or become more concrete. But other social norms are likely to become more abstract in a population that is increasing inhomogeneous with regard to religion, ideology and circumstance. This is not just a matter decreasing “fit” of concrete norms for the diversity of situations in that population, as Durkheim thought, but very likely also a matter of decreasing legitimacy of guarding privileges via social norms. Norms that govern dress according to social standing, give the right to speak or decide to people with high status (or to men or to adults) and the duty to listen and follow to people with low status (or to women or to children), etc., all such norms of social privilege must be quite concrete in order to work because the “lower” status person must recognize clearly when to yield privilege to the other. Once this function is gone and social norms guarding privilege have vanished, the highest norms left in a heterogeneous population are likely to be very abstract. For institutional design, this change means that we need to put our effort more into dealing with abstractness of norms than into battling anomie. Norm-guided behavior is no longer a matter of “norm conformity”. Norms and rational action come close together with the use of smart norms and this changes the role of schools in influencing norm-guided behavior. There are important knowledge-, forum-, and training tasks for schools in preparing students in the use of smart norms. The curriculum of schools thus would have to adapt to the shift towards abstract norms.

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