

Institute for Advanced Study
School of Social Science

Social Norms and Cooperation

Social norms are necessary for human cooperation: only if individuals know what behavior is acceptable and what is not are they likely to act collaboratively in their group, community, or society. Even so, such norms are not sufficient for collaboration. One norm may conflict with another, and within the same society different groups may disagree about what the shared standards should be. Because of the importance of social norms and the contention they generate, their analysis embraces virtually all the social sciences (as well as other disciplines such as neuroscience, ecology, and evolutionary biology). Thus, for example, ethnographers detail the great variability in norms (and the penalties for breaching them) across different cultures. Historians study the factors that lead to changes in the rules of conduct for social, family and sexual interaction. Economists are interested in the extent to which trade forces people to trust that their fellow traders share the same norms of behavior. Legal scholars examine the interplay between mores, whose violation carries informal sanctions, and laws, for which there are institutionalized mechanisms for punishment. Political theorists and political scientists argue about which duties are required of citizens if democracy is to function properly--and what the consequences from failing to meet those obligations are or should be. Social psychologists seek to understand the remarkable power norms have to channel conduct in socially prescribed directions, while psychoanalysts try to explain the large variation in individual behavior that occurs in spite of these norms. How do prescriptions for behavior become social norms? How do norms serve to promote cooperation? What are their other effects? The thematic year will be planned by Institute professor Eric S. Maskin, in consultation with Simon A. Levin, Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology, and Deborah A. Prentice, Professor of Psychology, from Princeton University.