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Behavioral Norms: Variants and Their Identification

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Abstract

Behavioral norms influence human interaction in virtually every situation, yet the study of norms in the behavioral sciences lags relative to their real-world power and significance. We describe basic distinctions in norms emerging in the behavioral and social sciences – in particular, how norms may be descriptive (i.e,, what people commonly do) versus injunctive (i.e,, what people should do), and social (i.e,, beliefs about what other people think one should do) versus moral (i.e,, what one privately thinks one should do). We further describe empirical methods that researchers can use to examine whether any particular behavior is inspired by norms and which variant might be responsible. We end by describing emerging findings and questions in recent work on norms. Thus, the purpose of this review is to attempt to organize scholarship about norms for social and personality psychology, in the hope that it may foster empirical investigation of norm-driven behavior and thus build connections to other behavioral sciences.

Nobody is issued an instruction manual on how to live life among humans, but most people seem to know the rules. They know when to say "please" and "thank you." They know that you can scream at a rock concert but should stay hushed at a golf tournament. They know the general principle of who will be seated first at a restaurant. They further know that it is gracious to loan a ladder to a neighbor but tacky to charge money for that loan. From forceps to grave, human life is wrapped in a tightly woven tapestry of rules, standards, and expectations that govern every aspect of social behavior.

These rules about behavior are called *norms*. And although behavioral norms remain informal – in that they are seldom codified into official statutes or laws – they give strict order to human action in every corner of social life. Indeed, their influence on social life is essential to prevent that life from being nasty, brutish, and short. Without norms for benign social behavior, human interaction might devolve into psychological or even physical violence. People all know that one does not signal disagreement in a conversation by punching the other person in the face, although at times the idea might be appealing.

Norms also make coordination among individuals easier so that everyday life does not descend into unworkable chaos. In most of the United States, people know that they should wait to turn left at a traffic light until all oncoming traffic has all passed – thus easing driving and preventing accidents. The rule, however, does not apply everywhere (Boston, for example, which reverses the custom somewhat by letting one car make a left turn first), but people are willing to wait at that traffic light for their turn because it creates a better state of affairs than the alternative, letting cars negotiate upon every light who goes first.

In this ~~manuscript~~, we provide a brief orientation to behavioral science scholarship about norms. Because of their ubiquity, behavioral norms have received empirical attention from every social science discipline, including psychology (Cialdini & Trost, 1998), sociology (Lindenberg, 2012), anthropology (Fiske, 1991; McElreath, Boyd, & Richerson, 2003), and economics (Fehr, Fischbacher, & Gächter, 2002; Sugden, 1989). However, we note two complications about the study of norms. First, relative to their pervasive influence, the attention that

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the behavioral sciences have given to their significance and operation is scant and incomplete, albeit increasing in recent years. One goal of this review is to provide a very brief précis of that emerging scholarship. Second, the study of norms is complicated by a failure among scholars to agree on a common terminology. Even within disciplines, there is little consensus about the features that define norms, and definitions and typologies have proliferated (Dubreuil & Grégoire, 2013). Thus, a second goal of this review is to highlight the most fundamental distinctions, commonalities, and elements that recur across disciplines in the definition of what constitutes a norm.

We propose that norms come in many variants, each with an empirical signature that signals its operation. Researchers can use these signatures to more precisely determine the type of norm that might be influencing social behavior in any given situation or even whether norms are in play at all. We then turn to open questions still to be addressed by psychological research about the operation of norms. Our overarching goal is to provide a framework, specifically for social and personality psychology, that we hope may encourage research in this fruitful area.

What is a Norm?

Even at its broadest level, one finds tension about what constitutes a norm. Indeed, sociologists have described up to 17 dimensions along which norms may vary (e.g., Gibbs, 1965; Morris, 1956). Table 1 lists and describes several of these dimensions. Further confusing the issue, norms may belong to more than one category at once, and unhelpfully – but perhaps unsurprisingly – scholars also use the same terms (e.g., *norm*, *social norm*, and *convention*) to mean different things. Here, we do not attempt a completely exhaustive review of all these categories, definition, and terms (for such an attempt, see Gibbs, 1965). Instead, to promote empirical study of these concepts, we focus our discussion on distinctions that recur most frequently within or across disciplines, or that we suspect could be particularly useful for future research. **T1**

The descriptive versus injunctive distinction

Probably the most common distinction in psychology is between descriptive and injunctive social norms (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990). Descriptive norms refer to how people tend to act in reality – their average or typical behavior. Injunctive norms, instead, serve as standards or guides to correct or appropriate behavior. They influence behavior through two different routes: by indicating how most people *tend to* act or by suggesting how most people think one *ought to* act, respectively.

Descriptive norms

When people follow descriptive norms, they conform to what most people are doing. As with following the flow of people leaving the subway, conforming to a descriptive norm can be efficient and adaptive, and is usually "morally neutral" (Cialdini et al., 1990, p. 1015; Milgram, Bickman, & Berkowitz, 1969). That is, descriptive norms may provide an informational benefit, such as locating the subway exit quickly, or allow people to coordinate their actions effectively, such as having an orderly and pleasing conversation. Sometimes, the initial behavior that becomes normative is entirely arbitrary, and the benefit of the descriptive norm is solely in coordinating behavior. That is, descriptive norms often provide solutions to coordination problems, in which everyone's desire is to do the same thing but may differ in the details they optimally prefer (i.e,, secondary preferences; Bicchieri, 2006). Indeed, descriptive norms are often called instead coordination norms. For instance, Jenna and Liz face a coordination dilemma if they

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Table 1. Norms as described in various literatures.

Type of norm	Similar concepts	Description	Example	References
Descriptive norm	Convention	What most people do. Provides information about what action is likely to be effective or adaptive, and/or helps coordinate behavior.	When traveling from Toronto to Ottawa, most people take Highway 401.	Cialdini et al., 1990
Convention	Coordination norm; custom	A descriptive norm that has become a long-standing behavioral commonality. Can take on injunctive features.	Brides often (and some would say should) wear white.	Bicchieri, 2006; Sugden, 1989; Ullmann-Margalit, 1977
Injunctive social norm		What most people think one *should* do. Provides information about what action is approved or disapproved of.	One should not swear in front of children.	Cialdini et al., 1990
Injunctive moral norm	Internalized social norm; personal norm; private norm; universal norm	A norm arising from intrapersonal moral pressures, not influenced by other people's opinions or behavior.	One should only buy products made in the USA.	Bicchieri, 2006; Elster, 1989; Schwartz, 1977; Scott, 1971
Moral	Taboo	Collective beliefs about how people ought to behave that anyone can defend with non-forceful sanctions. At the stricter end, violations of a taboo tend to be met with extreme disgust.	One should not have loud conversations in a library.	Durkheim, 1898/1963, 1912/1968; Gibbs, 1965
More		Collective beliefs about how people ought to behave so strong that they can be defended, with force, by anyone. Mores have a "sacred" quality in that they are seen as beyond human control.	Not common in modern cultures. The "honor killing" of rape victims is one example.	
Conjoint norm		A distinction between injunctive norms that are enforced and applied to the same people (conjoint) versus enforced by one individual or group on another group or individual (disjoint).	Everyone should bring a dish to a potluck.	Coleman, 1990; Ullmann-Margalit, 1977
Disjoint norm	Norms of partiality		One must not use a cell phone in class (enforced by teacher).	
Legal norm	Law	A type of disjoint norm with the force of law behind it, enforced by a specialized group of people, the police.	One must not trespass on private property.	Elster, 1989; Weber, 1922/1978
Collective norm		A distinction between norms for which most people think that one should act in accordance (collective) versus have no particular expectations about the act (problematic).	One should not drive a car on the sidewalk.	Gibbs, 1965
Problematic norm			One should not wear white after Labor Day.	

Note. These types of norm are not mutually exclusive categories. Rather, this represents a relatively exhaustive list of the types identified by different scholars.

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want to see a movie together but Jenna wants to see a documentary whereas Liz wants to see a comedy. If everyone ahead in line is buying tickets for the comedy, they might follow this descriptive norm, assuming it indicates the more entertaining movie. Crucially, descriptive norms have no force with which to compel behavior; they exert an influence only to the extent that one has no strong preference about which behavior to pursue. If everyone ahead of Jenna and Liz is buying tickets for a horror movie but they dislike the genre, this descriptive norm, although clear and salient, will have no effect on their choice of movie.

Injunctive norms

In contrast to the descriptive, many behavioral science theories emphasize the injunctive nature of norms. At its broadest, an injunction is often defined as "perceived social pressure to perform or not perform [a] behavior" (Ajzen, 1991, p. 188), with the role of "restricting egoistic impulses in favour of collective outcomes" (Biel & Thøgersen, 2007, p. 94). Injunctive norms are those that drive behavior through a feeling that one "should" or "ought" to act a certain way, and can be differentiated from mere preferences or attitudes – that is, how people might *want* to behave.

Injunctive norms provide solutions to situations like mixed-motive dilemmas, in which the best outcome for one individual opposes the best possible outcome for either another individual or one's group as a whole (Bicchieri, 2006). Examples of mixed-motive games in social science research include the prisoner's dilemma game, the commons dilemma, and the trust game (Camerer, 2003).

Consider the role the injunctive norm plays in the public goods game. In this game, players can contribute money to a common fund, which is then inflated in value and shared equally among all group members, irrespective of the amounts each individual donated. If group members cooperate and put large amounts into the common fund, they all benefit. However, the best outcome for each individual is to contribute nothing, thereby keeping his or her own resources while receiving an amount based on what others donate, a strategy called *free-riding* (Dawes & Thaler, 1988). The selfish advantage presented by free-riding should logically lead to groups whose members contribute nothing but experiment after experiment shows that people largely cooperate in the public goods game despite that advantage (Ledyard, 1995). An injunctive norm that one *should* contribute may provide enough impetus to produce this cooperation.

From descriptive to injunctive

Although we have described descriptive and injunctive norms as independent entities, in fact, norms do not fall perfectly into distinct categories and remain there, immutable. First, over time, a descriptive norm may become "moralized" simply by virtue of its ubiquity (Sugden, 1986, 1989); the fact that no one eats horse meat becomes a moral prohibition against eating it. Second, as a descriptive norm gains popularity, moving from trend to near-universal convention, any deviation by an individual has the potential to confuse or harm all who follow it (Rozin, 1999; Sugden, 1989). The practice of slower drivers moving to the rightmost lane on the highway may have begun as a mere trend, but at this point, most people would agree that everyone *should* conform to the norm. Finally, and most commonly, a great many injunctive norms are also descriptive: To the extent that others believe one should act a given way, they are likely to do so as well. Thus, in such circumstances, one's behavior may be driven by the belief that most people support the behavior (an injunctive norm) *and* the perception that most of them behave the same way (a descriptive norm).

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The Social versus Moral Distinction in Injunctive Norms

At first blush, injunctive norms would seem a purely social creation. People look to others, see what actions those others condone, and then use this social information to shape their own behavior. In fact, in psychology, the terms "norm" and "social norm" are often used interchangeably. However, injunctive norms are not exclusively social. Some are *moral*, in that the individual holds to a private standard of behavior regardless of their own preferences (i.e,, what they want to do) or the actions and opinions of other people. Thus, people may adopt a vegetarian diet regardless of what their friends and acquaintances eat, or pray for the health of an atheist friend.

What makes an injunctive norm social?

Bicchieri (2006) and Elster (1989) both delineated core differences between social and moral norms. First, for a norm to be social, people must believe that others have opinions about the correct behavior to pursue in certain situations. For example, voting becomes a social norm if people think that others believe that one should vote.

Other theorists go further and state that for an action to qualify as a social norm, people should believe that others will actively stigmatize or punish them for not adhering to it (Boyd, Gintis, Bowles, & Richerson, 2003; Mathew & Boyd, 2011). Research has found broad evidence for not only the belief that others will stigmatize but for the existence of actual punishment (Boyd, Gintis, & Bowles, 2010; Henrich et al., 2010). The sanctioning of norm violations – via gossip, ostracism, and other means – is a universal phenomenon (Black, 1998; Boehm, 1999; Brown, 1991; Dunbar, 1997; Wilson, Lindsey, & Schooler, 2000).

Sanctions have also been demonstrated experimentally: In the public goods game described above, group members will punish free-riders by levying fines, even if doing so costs them money (Fehr & Gächter, 2002). They are even willing to *altruistically punish* complete strangers they will never deal with themselves (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2004; Fehr et al., 2002), unless they come from societies in which interactions among strangers are rare (Henrich et al., 2010). Indeed, some researchers even propose higher-order sanctions: punishing group members who fail to punish norm violators (Boyd & Richerson, 1992; Henrich & Boyd, 2001).

What makes an injunctive norm moral?

In essence, the core feature of a social norm is that people are responding to external social pressure and threat of punishment. In the absence of these external forces, they would revert to a choice they personally preferred. According to Bicchieri (2006) and Elster (1989), the key characteristic of moral norms is that social pressures are unnecessary to sustain them. To be sure, such social pressures might exist, but people would continue to act consistently with those norms even if outside pressure did not exist, such as avoiding cannibalism or incest (e.g., Bicchieri, 2006; Sripada & Stich, 2006). One caveat, however, about the literature: The examples theorists use when talking about moral norms tend to be extreme (e.g., cannibalism), which leads to the inference that moral norms are universally held. This is not always true. Above, vegetarianism and certain religious practice provide two strong counter-examples to the idea that everyone possesses the same moral norms.

The fact that social pressures, although irrelevant, may or may not be present has created substantial confusion surrounding the concept of moral norms. Previous scholars have attempted to resolve this confusion by coining the term *internalized social* norms (Scott, 1971; see also Hechter, Ranger-Moore, Jasso, & Horne, 1999). We, however, prefer the term *moral norm* because it is

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agnostic with respect to ontology: Moral norms do not always appear to undergo a clear transition from purely social to internalized – even very young children appear to possess some moral norms (Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 1983).

Other theorists have termed these *personal* or *private norms* (Ainslie, 1982, 1984, 1986; Schwartz, 1977; Schwartz & Howard, 1984), but again, we prefer *moral norm*. First, these norms are not idiosyncratic or based on personal preferences, as other terms suggest. Moral norms are inherently tied to beliefs about what one thinks one *should* do, independent of preference, and there are commonalities in the intrapersonal pressures to which people respond. Second, they are not *of necessity* private. Again, some moral norms are recognized and enforced by others (e.g., cannibalism) and some are not (e.g., vegetarianism).

The Empirical Signatures of Norms

We have argued so far that norms are a pervasive influence in social life, an assertion we think few would disagree with. However, that does not mean it is easy to identify and describe when and where norms influence behavior. For example, most people, when entering a store, walk in a few steps and then turn to the right (Underhill, 1999). Is this behavior the product of a norm? If so, is the norm descriptive or injunctive, moral or social? Or, instead of a norm, is the right turn the product of a subtle suggestion of supermarket design, or the result of a metaphor taken from driving a car, or simply what people want to do?

Thus, the problem of building a science of norms is that one cannot merely observe an action and assume that a norm has produced it. Actions can be the product not only of norms but of private preferences, habits, or deliberate strategy. Moreover, one cannot look at a behavior and immediately know what type of norm produced it. Thus, to establish an empirical science of norms, one has to ask what it looks like when a norm is influencing people's behavior.

Following the suggestions of theorists from all the social sciences, we believe it is possible via empirical evidence to determine when norms – and which specific types of norms – influence human behavior. One just needs to know what empirical questions to ask and which experimental interventions to introduce. These methods can reveal the empirical signature that indicates a particular type of norm. A summary of these signatures is provided in Table 2, along with indications of which conditions are necessary versus sufficient to determine that the norm is influencing an observed behavior. T2

Table 2. Empirical signatures of different types of norms.

Norm type	Empirical signature
Descriptive	People believe the behavior is common[ab]
	Informing people that the behavior is common prompts them to conform[b]
Injunctive social	People think *others* believe the behavior is correct or appropriate[a]
	People think *others* believe the behavior is what they should do[a]
	People conform to the norm if their behavior is public[a]
	Others enforce the norm verbally or via sanctions[b]
	Others respond to violations of the norm with negative emotions[ab]
Injunctive moral	People believe the behavior is what they *should* do (vs. personally *want* to do)[ab]
	People feel tense and guilty (i.e., agitated) about violating the norm[ab]

[a]Indicates a necessary condition for determining that this type of norm is influencing behavior.
[b]Indicates a sufficient condition for determining that this type of norm is influencing behavior.

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Identifying descriptive norms

In a sense, descriptive norms are the easiest variant to capture empirically: just look at the real or perceived typicality of a behavior. For a descriptive norm to exist, the behavior it influences must be common and people must know it. Thus, one can examine whether descriptive norms influence behavior by manipulating the commonness of the behavior, or at least people's knowledge of that commonness, to see if people conform to it. For instance, people staying in hotels are more likely to reuse their linens and towels without washing if they are told that this is the preference of a majority of people who stay at the hotel (Goldstein, Cialdini, & Griskevicius, 2008). That said, it is important to note that *not* observing behavior X does not prove that there is no descriptive norm in favor of X. As noted in an example in an earlier section, descriptive norms provide a purely informational benefit to the individual. Thus, if one has a strong preference for behavior Y, that preference will easily override the influence of the descriptive norm.

Identifying injunctive social norms

Did those hotel guests forgo having their towels washed because they just followed the crowd (i.e,, responded to a descriptive norm), because they felt social pressure (i.e,, responded to an injunctive social norm), or simply because they wanted to (i.e,, acted based on preference)? Fortunately, there are several empirical indicators one can use to establish whether people alter their behavior because of an injunctive norm. In this section, we consider indicators of injunctive *social* norms.

Testing for expectations about others. Recall that an injunctive social norm requires a belief that other people have opinions about what behavior is proper or morally superior. Thus, one can test whether people are responding to a social norm by examining what they believe other people think they should do. To the extent that people believe others have firm opinions about socially appropriate behavior, and to the extent that their own behavior is sensitive to those beliefs, one has evidence of an influential social norm (Bicchieri, 2006, p. 11).

For instance, an ultimatum game is one in which a "proposer" must split chips that can be converted to money between himself or herself and another individual, the "receiver." The receiver can accept the proposed split and take the money, or reject it, in which case both participants receive nothing. Proposers in the ultimatum game often suggest splitting the chips equally, lest the second player think the transaction unfair. But what if the chips, unbeknownst to the receiver, are worth three times as much to the proposer as to the receiver? In that case, proposed splits still hover around 50% of the chips, but of course only the receiver thinks of that as an equal division of resources (Kagel, Kim, & Moser, 1996). Proposers clearly know what their partners' expectations about equality are, and use that knowledge of the social norm to their own advantage.

Importantly, when using others' perceived approval as an indicator of an injunctive social norm, the others in question must be from a currently relevant group. For instance, knowing that his grandparents would not approve of smoking and swearing is unlikely to make a teenage boy refrain from doing so – his peers are the relevant social group. An interesting potential exception to the rule, however, is the case of the imagined audience, when an important person or group who is not physically present becomes salient anyway; if one of those teenagers sees a car that reminds him of his grandparents', he may find himself suddenly stubbing out his cigarette and saying darn instead of damn (Baldwin, Carrell, & Lopez, 1990).

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Contrasting others' preferences against private preferences. It is important to remember that social norms comprise *other people's* preferences for what is appropriate behavior, not necessarily one's own preferences. That is, they exert a social influence on behavior that does not necessarily align with one's own attitudes or preferences. Jerry might prefer to eat ice cream for breakfast, but if other people disapprove, he may put the ice cream carton back in the freezer.

To ensure that Jerry's behavior is a product of an injunctive social norm rather than private preference, one needs to measure both what he privately *wants* to do and what he believes others *think* he should do. Taking these separate measurements has been one of the central features of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991; see also Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), which urges researchers not only to assess a person's private preferences (e.g., should contraception be used in sex) but also the extent to which "important others" would approve or disapprove of the same action. Injunctive norms, measured this way, typically predict behavior independently of private attitudes (preferences).

Indeed, sometimes a normative behavior fails to align with *anyone*'s private attitudes, but individuals fail to realize it because everyone's public behavior conforms. Thus, everyone ends up doing the opposite of what they each privately want to do. College students, for example, may prefer to moderate their drinking, but they presume that others will not like them unless they drink heavily. Consequently, despite their private preferences, they drink to fulfill a presumed injunctive norm and avoid the disapproval of others (Prentice & Miller, 1996). This paradox of *pluralistic ignorance* – in which everyone publicly goes along with an apparent social norm despite everyone's private preference to do the opposite – can result in the perpetuation of unpopular and harmful norms, such as binge drinking (Prentice & Miller, 1996), gang violence (Matza, 1964), and racial segregation (O'Gorman, 1975).

Making behavior observable. One crucial aspect of an injunctive social norm is that people believe they may be sanctioned or punished if other people catch them violating the norm. This suggests that people should be more likely to follow injunctive norms, rather than their personal preferences, when their behavior is publically observable, versus when it is private.

In one demonstration of this pattern, Batson and colleagues (Batson, Thompson, Seuferling, Whitney, & Strongman, 1999) asked college students to assign themselves or another student to a task in which they could win $30. The person not assigned would end up completing the same task but for no money. Students could assign either themselves to the $30 condition, assign the other student, or flip a coin. The vast majority of participants stated that flipping the coin was the right thing to do – a clear injunctive norm. Thus, when making assignments publically, most students not surprisingly opted to flip the coin. However, when they were left in a private room, most said they flipped a coin, but 80% of them emerged from the room stating that the coin had assigned them to the $30 condition – far more than chance allows. In private, with social pressures off, people apparently acted on their internal preference to assign themselves to the desirable condition, although they reported otherwise.

Observing enforcement. Finally, one can establish the presence of an injunctive social norm if one observes people enforcing it. As in the public goods game, do people express approval of a person when that person adheres to a norm and disapproval when that person violates it? Will they punish others who fail to follow a social norm, at a cost to themselves? If the answer to these questions is yes, one is likely observing an injunctive norm. For example, Milgram and colleagues (Milgram, Liberty, Toledo, & Wackenhut, 1986) quantified reactions to a counter-normative, line-jumping behavior: Verbal and nonverbal objections, expressions of disapproval, and physical actions were common and were sometimes even

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enacted by observers unaffected by the violator's behavior (those ahead of the line-jumper in line).Further, perceiving that others have violated a norm evokes reactive emotions (Haidt, 2003; Sripada & Stich, 2006). For example, contempt and anger are common responses to norm violations like refusing to give up one's bus seat to an elderly person or smoking in a non-smoking section (Rozin, Lowery, Imada, & Haidt, 1999). Measuring these emotional reactions in observers of a behavior can provide evidence for whether that behavior is regulated by a social norm.

Identifying injunctive moral norms

Moral norms can be distinguished from social norms by the fact that they are intrinsically motivated rather than socially imposed. Thus, whereas social norms are followed only when one believes that others endorse them, moral norms are followed unconditionally, regardless of what one expects about the beliefs and behaviors of others (Bicchieri, 2006). Thus, if a behavior is driven by a moral norm, the presence or absence of others should not be a concern (French & Raven, 1959). According to this logic, some behaviors, such as keeping a promise, follow moral norms. Whether one's decision is known to others does not affect the rate at which a promise is kept (Kerr, Garst, Lewandowski, & Harris, 1997; Kerr & Kaufman-Gilliland, 1994). Similarly, in the trust game, people trust total strangers even when their decisions are completely private (Dunning, Anderson, Schlösser, Ehlebracht, & Fetchenhauer, 2014).

Contrasting private moral feelings against private preferences. As with social norms, it is important to distinguish the operation of a moral norm from pure preference, but one must go about it somewhat differently. There is no social injunction stating that a person should prefer vanilla over chocolate ice cream, so merely noting that a person's choice of vanilla is not subject to others' approval – as one would to test for a social norm – does not make it a moral norm. One straightforward method is of differentiation simply to ask. For example, Lisa may want to go out on the town with her friends but feel a duty to visit her mother instead; there is a distinction between what Lisa *wants* to do and what she feels she *ought to* do. By measuring both "want" and "ought," a researcher can determine just how much Lisa's decision to visit her mother is due to a moral norm. Ajzen (1991) included a direct, face valid measure of moral norms by asking participants for their perceived *moral obligation* to behave in a particular way. He found it a predicted behavior independent of preferences, attitudes, and social norms. Similarly, Dunning et al. (2014) found that whether people want to trust another person and whether they think they should trust that person independently predicted the decision to trust.

Emotional indicators. Following a moral norm is about doing what one should do. *Not* doing what one ought (or thinking of not doing it) has been shown to produce feelings of *agitation*, including anxiety, guilt, shame, and general arousal, whereas following the norm precludes these feelings (Elster, 1989; Higgins, 1987; Schlösser, Fetchenhauer, & Dunning, 2014). These emotions differ from the type of disappointment that comes from not fulfilling one's preferences, which tend to be more quiescent, such as feeling sad or dejected, and are thus a helpful indicator of moral norms.

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As one example, feelings of intense agitation – to the point of physical illness – were reported by researchers who conducted field studies on norm violation, such as asking strangers for their seats on the subway or cutting in front of others in line (Milgram et al., 1986; Milgram & Sabini, 1978). Research confederates reported feeling nauseated and embarrassed as they transgressed. Milgram became so tense that it took three tries before he himself could actually verbalize a request for a subway seat. Interestingly, refusing requests for help can also turn out to be norm violations, as suggested in work by Flynn and Lake (2008). In their experiments, participants were approached to fill out a short questionnaire. Those considering the request reported that the possibility of refusing felt emotionally difficult, awkward, and embarrassing – thus prompting people to grant the request.

Overlapping norms

The keen reader has likely noticed by now that these three types of norm – descriptive, injunctive social, and injunctive moral – are not at all orthogonal. The same behavior, like brushing one's teeth, can be influenced by all three types of norm at once: Most people brush their teeth (descriptive), people think I *should* brush my teeth (social), and I feel guilty if I do not pick up the brush (moral). Indeed, a behavior can be influenced by any combination of these three norms, although some come more readily to mind than others; secondary attributes like conjoint versus disjoint, described in the next section, become useful in interpreting, for example, a norm that children (but not their parents) must go to bed when it gets dark. This is an instance of a behavior influenced by a social but not a descriptive norm.

Emerging Questions

Several basic questions remain regarding the operation of norms. Consider the following examples and how fundamental they are.

Other attributes of norms

In addition to the variants of norms described above, other authors have proposed distinctions also worthy of study. In particular, one can ask whether norms are *prescriptive* versus *proscriptive*, and *conjoint* versus *disjoint*.

Prescriptive versus proscriptive norms. Both types of injunctive norm, which regulate how people *should* act, can be further subdivided based on whether a given norm specifies an approved action or inaction (Coleman, 1990; Sorrels & Kelley, 1984). *Prescriptive norms* prescribe desirable behaviors, like wiping one's feet on entry to a house, whereas *proscriptive norms* proscribe undesirable behaviors, like blowing one's nose on one's sleeve. Thus far, little empirical work has examined the psychological differences between adherence to these two types of norm, yet it seems to us that they share characteristics with approach and avoidance motivations (Elliot & McGregor, 2001).

They also differ in frequency, in that formalized injunctions tend to focus more on proscribing undesirable behaviors than on prescribing desirable ones. For example, the law states that one should not steal, but no law specifies how much one's income should be donated to charity. Examples of this asymmetry are easy to find. The ten commandments in Christian tradition contain eight proscriptions (e.g., *thou shalt not steal*) and only two prescriptions (e.g., *honor thy father and mother*). The Bill of Rights in the American Constitution contain eight amendments expressing prohibitions (e.g., Congress will make no law respecting an establishment of a religion), one

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containing a prescription (e.g., the accused will enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial), and one with both. Consistent with this, people tend to attribute the avoidance of undesirable behavior to the power of social norms and the performance of desirable behavior to more personal, moral norms (Critcher & Dunning, 2013).

More work could investigate circumstances under which more formal social norms are concerned with prescription as well as proscription. Some of the little work that exists shows that countries differ on this dimension: European countries, either in their constitutions or laws, tend to compel governments and individuals to perform affirmative acts promoting social welfare, whereas such laws are virtually absent in American law (Glendon, 1991). What other circumstances are there that promote prescription? Or why is the current emphasis on proscription of bad behavior?

Conjoint versus disjoint norms. Norms also vary in terms of the degree of overlap or separation between the targets and beneficiaries of the norm (Coleman, 1990). Conjoint norms, at one end of the spectrum, are those for which the targets and beneficiaries are identical (e.g., a norm of sharing tips among waitstaff). Disjoint norms, at the other end, are those for which the two groups are completely distinct (e.g., the norm mentioned above, enforced by parents, that children must go to bed at sundown). Similarly, some theorists distinguish informal norms from those that are enforced by a specialized subgroup of the population (e.g., police; Elster, 1989; Gibbs, 1965; Weber, 1922/1978). These norms are often enforced by formal societal sanctions and are thus referred to as legal norms (for examples discussing the intersection of law and norms, see Ellickson, 1998; Posner, 1996, 2000).

Acquisition and spread of norms

In addition to different types of norms, future research could profitably focus on how norms are acquired – especially in a society with rapidly changing technology. With each novel communication technology, questions of etiquette arise that require an appropriate norm. In the early days of the telephone, people struggled with what to say when they answered a call, with Edison favoring "hello" and Bell recommending "ahoy" (Gitelman, 2006). In more modern times, the management of romantic relations becomes uncertain in the era of social media. When a couple breaks up, who should change their Facebook status back to "single" first, the "dumper" or the "dumpee"? An emerging consensus suggests the dumpee should be given the courtesy of telling the rest of the world about the relationship's dissolution, although this consensus is currently far from universal (Gershon, 2010).

This example exposes two fundamental questions about norms: First, how are they formed, and second, how are they spread? At a group or even population level, quite a lot is known about the adoption and spread of trends, which become norms when they gain enough favor (Berger, 2013; Gladwell, 2000). Beginning with Tarde (1903) and continuing with Ryan and Gross's (1943) seminal exploration of the adoption of hybrid seed among Iowa farmers, theorists have long described the diffusion of an idea or innovation in terms of an S-curve. At first, only a small group of "early adopters" pursue the behavior (e.g., speaking out about climate change in the 1980s) and it has little momentum, but if it continues to (slowly) gain support, the innovation reaches a "tipping point" from which adoption increases exponentially until most of a population has accepted it and it becomes a de facto norm. The last part of the S-curve delineates another period of slowed increase during which "late adopters" gradually accept the norm. In North America, the reality of climate change is now generally accepted, albeit not universally.

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Indeed, in many circles, it is no longer acceptable to deny the impact of climate change (e.g., Knapton, 2014). In other words, climate change acceptance – and, to some degree, associated pro-environmental behaviors – has become a social norm.

On an individual level, which is more the purview of psychology and less of sociology, much less is known about how norms are acquired and spread. Many norms are acquired in childhood, between the ages of three and five (Nucci, 2001; Turiel, 1983), yet the specifics of how norms are acquired from others are somewhat controversial. Some researchers have proposed that the perception of sad faces in response to a norm violation teaches the child the content of the norm (Blair, 1995; Blair, Jones, Clark, & Smith, 1997; but see also Nichols, 2002). A recent review suggested that ritualized infant–caregiver interaction and mimicry are crucial to norm learning (Rossano, 2012). Other research suggests that explicit verbal cues are central to children's learning of norms (Edwards, 1987), but research on such proximal cues is sparse. Further, children are rarely told to punish norm violators and yet will systematically do so anyway (Edwards, 1987). How do they learn that?

Regardless of how exactly it occurs, people clearly adopt norms common to the group in which they are raised. For example, Catholic women express more negative attitudes toward birth control if a picture of the Pope is flashed repeatedly in front of them, even though the flashes are so fast that the women are not aware a human face has been presented (Baldwin et al., 1990). Thus, the notion of moral norms suggests that people may develop a "natural aversion" to acting contrary to their group members' preferences – an aversion that eventually becomes autonomous from the wishes of others (Bicchieri, 2006).

That said, other theorists suggest that moral norms, at least in part, emerge from the evolutionary endowment of our species; that is, humans, relative to other animals, are especially attuned to opportunities to coordinate and cooperate with others (Feldman, 1984; Tomasello, 2009, 2011), and so internalize norms to make those opportunities possible. It is easy to imagine how a norm like that of reciprocity could serve the needs of a group and its members by smoothing the distribution of resources and making potentially fatal individual shortages less likely. From there, norms for new situations tend to spring from analogies to similar situations, such that a norm of reciprocity learned sharing toys as a child may be naturally applied at the conference table as an adult (Sugden, 1989). The stronger the analogy, the more likely it is to become the dominant norm.

Second, norms with stronger emotional content are more likely to persist (Nichols, 2002; Sperber, 1996). For instance, many etiquette rules have not survived from the 16th century into the present, but those that have survived tend to be those rooted in disgust (e.g., "urinate only in private" vs. "put your napkin over your left shoulder or forearm"; Nichols, 2002, pp. 250–251; Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 1993). Emotional content makes norms more salient, thus ensuring their propagation. As a result, moral norms may be particularly resistant to change – as suggested by constant discussion, argument, and even violence over moralized topics like abortion and same-sex marriage.

So far, these examples are of norms that are relatively adaptive. Other norms, however, are neutral, like spelling "behavior" with a "u", or potentially harmful, like female genital mutilation (FGM). The proliferation of examples of harmful norms appears, at first, to pose a serious problem to the argument for shaping by natural selection: If following the norm decreases one's chances of survival or reproduction – both of which FGM has the potential to do – natural selection should favor its elimination. However, norms are additionally shaped by *sociological* natural selection: a process by which, for example, certain behaviors come to be associated with a prestigious social group and then proliferate throughout the rest (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001; Rogers, 1995). Consider the "Alexandra limp" adopted by London ladies in the 19th century – a limp without medical grounds, caused by the deliberate choice of shoes with mismatched

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heels. This strange trend was inspired by the real limp of queen consort Alexandra of Denmark after a bout of rheumatic fever (Rappaport, 2003, p. 24).

People live in complex webs of social ties to other individuals, which may aid or inhibit the adoption of norms. Much recent work has shown that actions and attitudes tend to spread from individual to individual through these social networks. Researchers have captured how social networks transmit such diverse behaviors as obesity, smoking, personal happiness, and divorce from person to person (Christakis & Fowler, 2007, 2008; Fowler & Christakis, 2008; McDermott, Fowler, & Christakis, 2013). However, many questions remain with respect to, for instance, how much such transmission depends on the density, homogeneity, and permeability of the network.

When does a moral norm become social?

In an earlier section, we described the not-uncommon situation of a social norm taking on a moral character as well (Rozin, 1999; Sugden, 1986, 1989). Less considered – probably because of the general confusion around moral norms – is the possibility of the reverse: Can a norm that begins as a moral norm held by an individual or small group become a social norm that one fears to break? This notion is antithetical to much of the current theorizing by moral psychologists, who differentiate moral norms from preferences, attitudes, and conventions on exactly that basis – that they are considered the correct behavior not just for the self but for everyone else as well (e.g., Haidt, Rosenberg, & Hom, 2003; Rozin, 1999; Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005; Turiel, 1983).

But is this really the case? When people respond to internal moral prescriptions, when do they insist that others must follow those prescriptions as well? Most descriptions of morality include universality as a defining feature (Hare, 1981; Kant, 1786/1947; see also Haidt et al., 2003). By this logic, for a norm to be moral, it must apply to everyone; for example, one cannot hold a moral norm of equality but say that it does not apply to hiring practices. We agree that this viewpoint makes theoretical sense and that in a perfect world, holding a moral norm would include applying it equally to everyone, all the time.

In reality, however, situational constraints abound and have strong effects on behavior. Thus, it is not at all difficult to find instances of moral norms to which the principle of universality does not apply – at least at the level of behavioral enforcement. If we were to ask a moral vegetarian and a Catholic how they thought others *should* behave, we expect they would indicate that others should not eat meat and that everyone should say grace before a meal, respectively. But would either of them try to enforce those norms at, say, a job interview dinner? Unlikely, there are many situational constraints to prevent it.

We propose that moral norms may be characterized by a weak universality – perhaps a feeling that others *ought* to behave as we do but not necessarily any likelihood of trying to enforce it. A rational analysis of the situation, expectations about how others are likely to perceive the behavior, and, ironically, norms of autonomy – freedom to choose – are all factors weighing against it. The question of when and how these situational factors can be overcome is a question worthy of future study.

Power of norms to change behaviors

Another fundamental question is how successfully social norms might be harnessed to change people's behavior in desirable ways. Can norms, for example, cause people to lose weight, exercise, or vote? Recent work suggests that norms are a powerful "nudge" that directs people toward desired behavior. Recall the Goldstein et al. (2008) study described above about hotel

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guests deciding whether they wanted to reuse their unwashed linens. Telling people that a majority of guests preferred to reuse their unwashed linens prompted a greater proportion of guests to do the same than did an exhortation to protect the environment by saving the water using in the washing. In a similar vein, a study on voting found social pressure to be much more powerful than any other intervention in prompting citizens to vote (Gerber, Green, & Larimer, 2008). Potential voters who received materials showing their neighbors' voting rates voted themselves at a rate 8% higher than the control group. Reminding people of their civic duty to vote raised voting rates by a mere 2%.

Social insight into norms

A related question is whether people understand the power of social norms to shape human behavior. Recent research suggests that people have surprisingly little insight into the power of norms. In work designed to prompt people to reduce their energy use, Cialdini (2007; Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini, Goldstein, & Griskevicius, 2008) found that the strongest influence on people's behavior was being given information about their neighbors' energy reduction. However, when asked, respondents listed this information as having the least influence on their own energy usage.

Other work repeats this pattern of underappreciation. In particular, people miss just how much normative pressure there is to accede to an individual's request for help. In Milgram and Sabini's (1978) study about giving up one's seat in the subway, people on average thought that only 14% would give up their seat upon request. In reality, 56% stood up to give their seat, with an additional 12% sliding over to make room for the person making the request. Flynn and Lake (2008) discovered that people were much more likely to accede to requests than their peers expected, especially in those situations in which refusing the request would result in the most social discomfort. Similarly, Fetchenhauer and Dunning (2009, 2010) discovered that people grossly underestimate how much their peers would honor an act of trust. Participants on average thought it was slightly more likely that their trust would be exploited rather than rewarded, when in fact 80% of those trusted reciprocated the trust placed in them.

In short, although powerful, norms appear to exert an influence of which people are generally unaware. Future work could examine the breadth of this invisibility and its impact on everyday perceptions and behavior, for both self and other.

Conclusion

The importance of norms in structuring social life can, perhaps, be best expressed through metaphor. Language has grammar, an agreed-upon structure that enables listeners or readers to decipher its meaning. To express the meaning of this article in a way that is understandable to readers, we have followed – to the best of our ability – a strict set of rules, conventions, and practices. So, too, is it with behavior. For humans to interact successfully, they must adopt a common grammar of practice and convention. Without it, chaos, misunderstanding, and malcontent would ensue. Given this fundamental function, norms carry the responsibility for some of the most basic work underlying human relations. Many scholars have poured intellectual sweat into the grammar of language. We suggest that similar toil devoted to the study of the structure underlying social behavior may prove at least as valuable, and fascinating.

Short Biographies

Joanna E. Anderson is currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Psychology Department of Cornell University. She received her BSc from the University of Toronto and her PhD from the

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University of Waterloo, both in psychology. Her research focuses on social cognitive processes and behavior in interpersonal relationships. In her primary lines of research, she investigates (a) the (mis)trusting attributions people make for their partners' generous behaviors as a function of self-esteem and risk level, and (b) trust behavior between strangers as a function of moral norms and avoidant attachment.

David Dunning is a Professor of Psychology at Cornell University. He received his BA from Michigan State University and his PhD from Stanford University, both in psychology. His research interests focus on barriers to self-knowledge, motivated reasoning and perception, and social influences on judgment and decision-making. Much of his work is summarized in *Self-insight: Obstacles and barriers on the road to knowing thyself* (Psychology Press, 2005).

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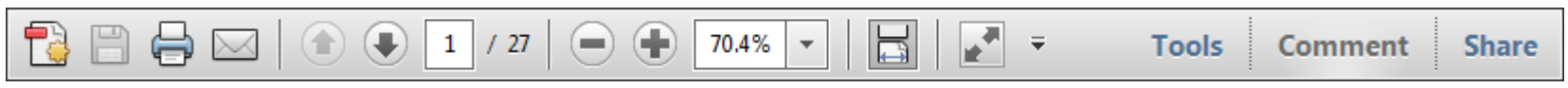

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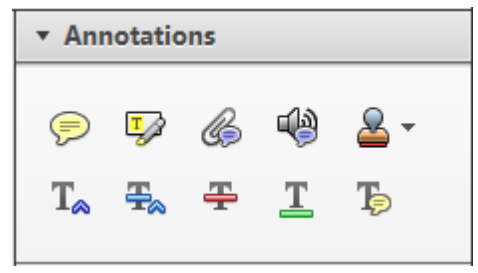

1. Replace (Ins) Tool – for replacing text.

Strikes a line through text and opens up a text box where replacement text can be entered.

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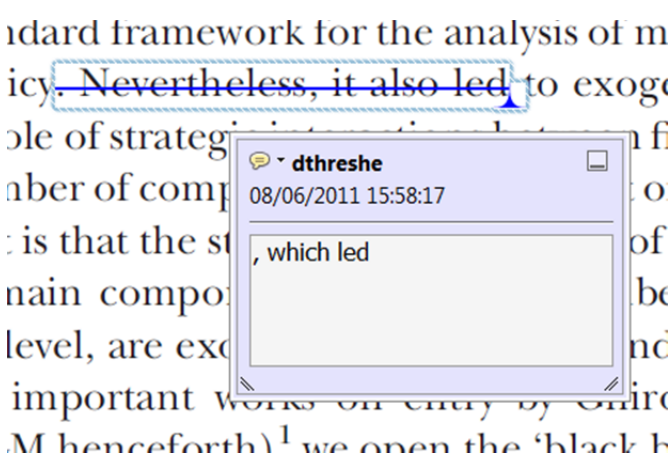

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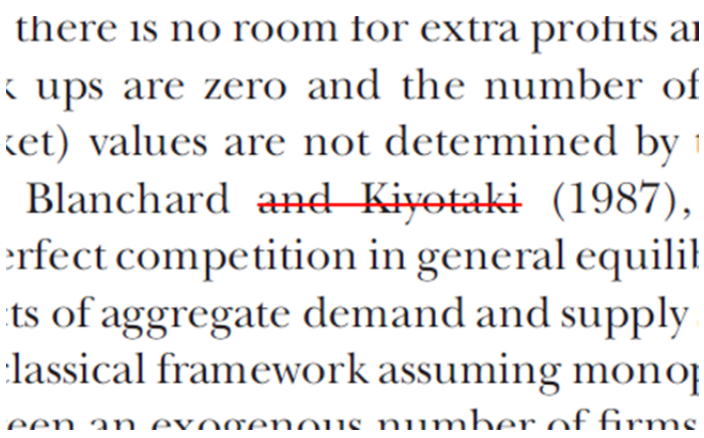

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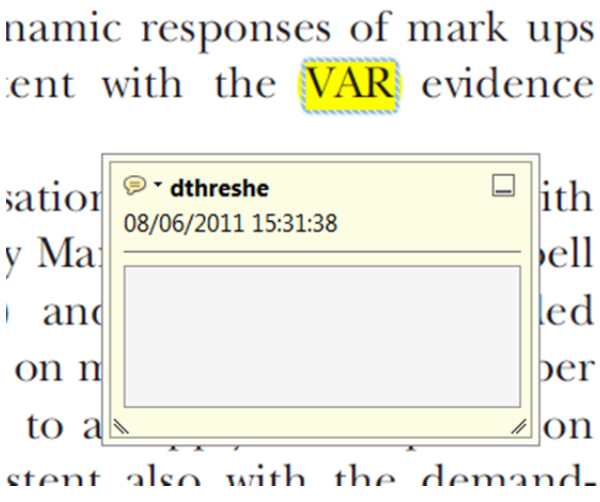

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Marks a point in the proof where a comment needs to be highlighted.

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- Click at the point in the proof where the comment should be inserted.
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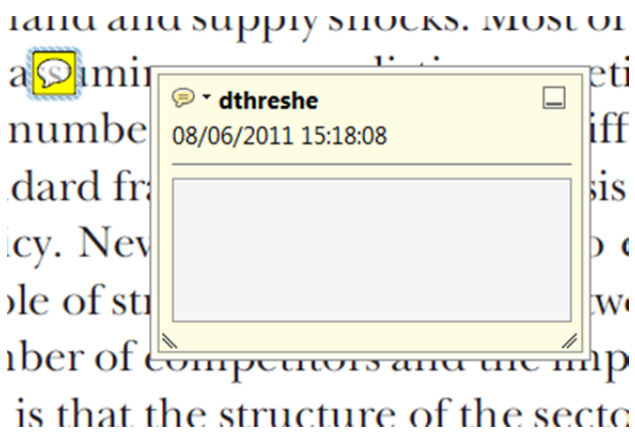

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Inserts an icon linking to the attached file in the appropriate pace in the text.

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- Click on the Attach File icon in the Annotations section.
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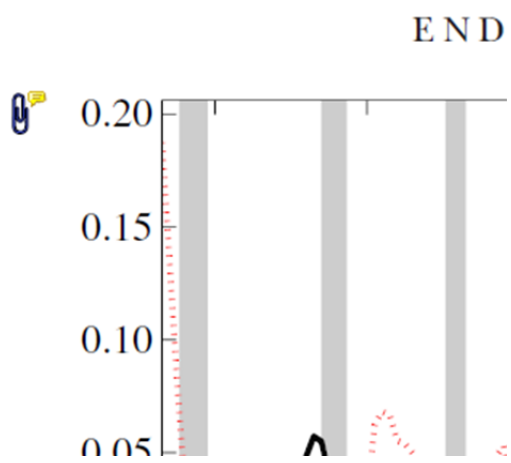

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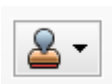

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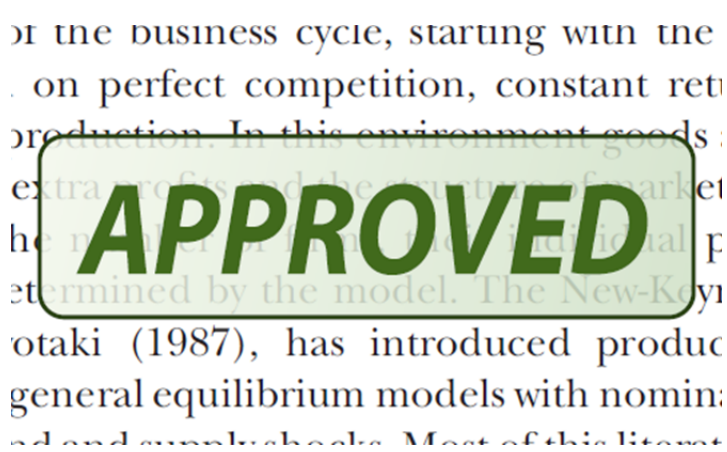

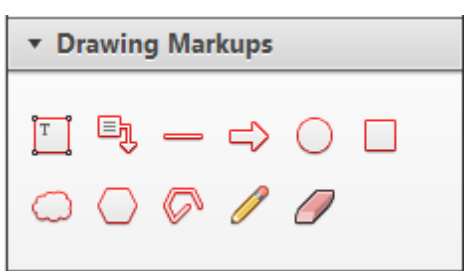

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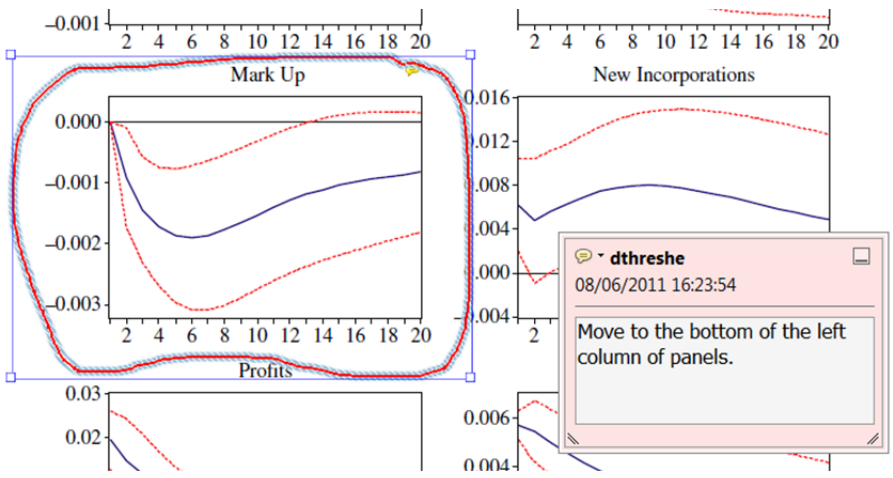
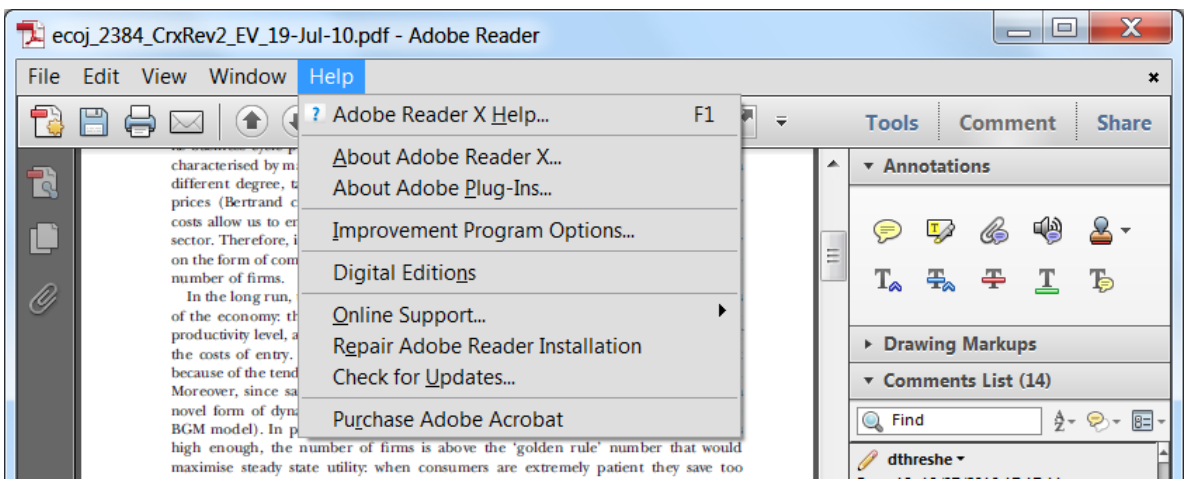
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