

Gender and Political Representation

Session 4: On the Transmission of (Gender) Norms

Mirko Wegemann

Universität Münster
Institut für Politikwissenschaft

30 April 2025

What we did last week...

- conceptualization of representation
- different types of representation
- whether and how descriptive representation matters for gender equality

Plan for today

1. conceptualizing social norms
2. discussing their relevance in the study of gender and politics
3. learning how they can be transmitted

Collective Behavior



Would you stop?

Collective Behavior



Would you take it?

Collective Behavior

Our behavior is deeply influenced by considerations of what others think about us.



“We are social animals embedded in thick networks of relations, and what we do has consequences, for us and for others.”
(Bicchieri 2017, p. 10)

Survey on the readings



What social norms are...

“Social norms, like many other social phenomena, are the unplanned result of individuals’ interaction. It has been argued that social norms ought to be understood as a kind of grammar of social interactions. Like a grammar, a system of norms specifies what is acceptable and what is not in a society or group. And, analogously to a grammar, it is not the product of human design.” (Bicchieri, Muldoon, and Sontuoso 2011)

Roots of collective behavior

Collective behavior is shaped by conventions, such as...:

- Custom
- Signalling system
- Fashion
- Descriptive norm
- Social norm

What are the differences?

Roots of collective behavior

- Customs: act to fulfil an individual preference
- Signalling system: act to comply with other expectations for coordination
- Fashion: act to comply to follow the trend
- Descriptive norm: act to comply with behavior of most people in reference network
- Social norm: act to comply with behaviour of most people and with expectations of others in reference network

Roots of collective behavior

Question by **Vincent**: What influence does the structure and hierarchy of a reference group have on social and normative expectations?

Question by **Caroline**: How can we systematically distinguish between individual preferences and a social norm in ambiguous cases?

An example: Politicians' traits



(a) Donald Trump



(b) Angela Merkel

Figure: King vs. mother – gender-stereotyped portrayals of political leaders

Let's try to dissect gendered leadership stereotypes into *customs*, *descriptive* and *injunctive norms*.

An example: Politicians' traits

Following Bicchieri (2017),

- Custom: "If I enter politics, I behave strong and assertive, as this pushes my career."
- Social beliefs/norms:
 - empirical: "Political leaders are often strong and assertive, so I should be the same if I enter politics."
 - normative: "People expect political leaders to be strong and assertive, so I should be the same if I enter politics."

How norms come into being...

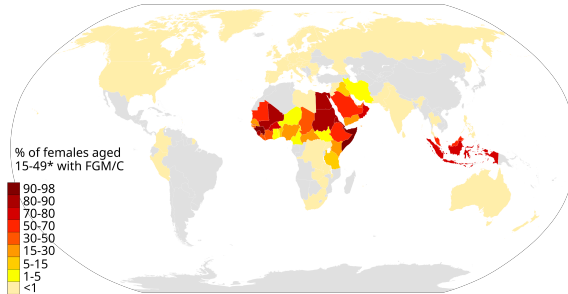


Figure: Spread of female genitalia mutilation in 2020 ([Wikimedia](#))

Why and how do norms come into being?

How norms come into being...

“In all countries studied, evidence shows that parents want what is best for their children. It is this most basic value that motivates a parent’s decision to perform FGM/C and participate in other harmful practices, since failure to comply with the social convention brings shame and social exclusion to girls and their families.” (Mackie and LeJeune 2009)

How norms come into being...

According to Bicchieri (2017), functionalist explanation falls short: often norms are not utility-maximizing. Instead,

- change in belief structure
- collective decision to establish norm
- implementation of sanctioning system
- normative expectations
- empirical expectations

...and how they change

Question by **Johanna**: Can social norms change, particularly those on politically contested topics?

...and how they change

The likeliness of norm change depends on the underlying mechanism that motivated behavior:

- customs: change possible once there are better means of achieving the desired outcome, external conditions change or new preferences emerge
- descriptive norms: change needs to be coordinated → most people need to change their behavior at the same time
- social norms: changing behaviour is potentially very costly, first-movers need to fear heavy sanctions

...and how they change

If change is so difficult, how can we explain this?



(a) Cabinet Adenauer II
(1953-1957)



(b) Cabinet Scholz (2021-2025)

Figure: From male-only to gender parity

...and how they change

Social norms can change...



Figure 3.2 The steps taken when abandoning a norm.

Figure: How norms change (Bicchieri 2017)

...and how they change

Belief change is detrimental and can be facilitated by...

- awareness to the norm
- new information (e.g., women are politically active in other countries and have been good leaders)
- presentation of alternatives
- change in external conditions

Definition of transmission

Cultural transmission is the process of acquisition of behaviors, attitudes, or technologies through imprinting, conditioning, imitation, active teaching and learning, or combinations of these.

(Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1982, p. 19)

Types of Transmission



Types of Transmission



Types of Transmission



Types of Transmission

In groups, please discuss the type of transmission described on your picture. Focus on the following aspects:

- How are attitudes, behaviors and norms transmitted?
- How intense is the transmission?
- Does this form of transmission facilitate persistence or mutation?
- How does the social context influence this type of transmission?

Transmission in different areas of life

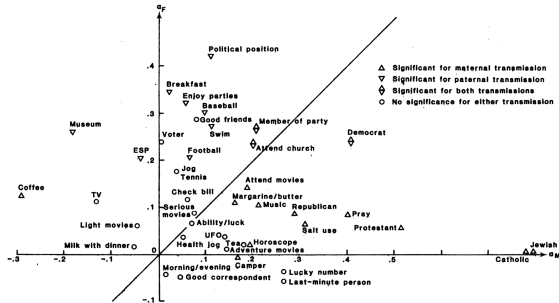


Fig. 2. Coefficients of paternal and maternal transmission (α_M and α_F) estimated for 41 traits on the basis of data shown in Table 5 from an additive model of vertical transmission. The 45° line corresponds to equal influence of father and mother; α_M and α_F are statistically significant if their departure from zero is greater than twice their estimated standard errors. The standard errors are obtained from the maximum likelihood estimation, and the test of significance is approximate, especially if the number of informative ($H \times h$ and $h \times H$) parental pairs is small.

Figure: Transmission in different areas of life (Cavalli-Sforza et al. 1982, p. 21)

Lessons for studies on gender

Questions to consider when studying gender in politics...

- strength of institutions (family, public education institutions, social networks)
- interactions between different types of transmission (conflicting vs. mutually reinforcing?)
- (un)awareness of gender norms

What we've learned today...

In our last conceptual session, we talked about...

- ...what social norms are
- ...why they matter for gender inequalities
- ...how they are transmitted

To prepare for next week...

- **next week, we'll meet at 4pm s.t.**
- we'll discuss our first empirical article on the relationship between the plough and gender inequalities
- Reading:
 - **Alesina A, Giuliano P, and Nunn N (2013)** On the Origins of Gender Roles: Women and the Plough*. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* **128** (2), 469–530. ISSN: 0033-5533, 1531-4650. DOI: [10.1093/qje/qjt005](https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjt005)

Thank you for your attention!
Any further questions?

Literature

-  **Alesina A, Giuliano P, and Nunn N (2013)** On the Origins of Gender Roles: Women and the Plough*. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* **128** (2), 469–530.
-  **Bicchieri C (2017)** Diagnosing Norms. *Norms in the Wild: How to Diagnose, Measure, and Change Social Norms*. Ed. by C Bicchieri. Oxford University Press, 2017, 0.
-  **Bicchieri C, Muldoon R, and Sontuoso A (2011)** Social Norms.
-  **Cavalli-Sforza LL et al. (1982)** Theory and Observation in Cultural Transmission. *Science* **218** (4567), 19–27.
-  **Mackie G and LeJeune J (2009)** *Social Dynamics of Abandonment of Harmful Practices: A New Look at the Theory*. Tech. rep. IWP-2009-06. UNICEF, 2009.