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Abstract

This paper identifies and describes two new norm-based strategies for institutional change to address intractable social problems. In both strategies, advocates “foreground” and criticize norms supporting the institutional status quo before either promoting an alternative existing norm via *normative reframing* of the issue, or creating and promoting an entirely new norm via *normative innovation* to build support for new institutional arrangements. Drawing on examples of institutional change addressing the problems of climate change and violence against women, the analysis illustrates how these strategies are especially effective in the face of opposition from vested interests or problematic existing norms.

Keywords

norms, informal institutions, policy change, framing, violence against women, climate change

Introduction

A growing body of work shows that social norms, or shared standards of appropriate behavior, shape a wide range of human practices. Norms can obstruct efforts to address difficult problems through policy action and institutional reform, and can also facilitate such efforts, for example, by solving social coordination problems and enabling social solidarity. Norms are also essential components of effective institutions, whether those institutions are “formal” ones such as official policies and laws, or whether they are “informal” institutions defined as the “socially shared rules . . . that are created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels” (Helmke and Levitsky 2004, 727). Given the importance of norms, this paper asks the following questions: Can we apply our newly expanded understanding of norms to help solve intractable problems and reform ineffective institutions? How can we alter the influence or content of prevailing norms so that they help solve problems rather than frustrating our efforts?

Answering these questions requires a better understanding of norm change, especially *intentional* norm change (Berman 2001; Krook and True 2012). Much of the work on norm creation and emergence characterizes the process as essentially contingent and path dependent (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Helmke and Levitsky 2006), or conceptualizes norm creation as analogous to

random genetic “mutations” that spread when proven successful (Axelrod 1986; Richerson and Boyd 2005). These accounts may capture some aspects of norm development, but what is lacking is a more detailed theoretical account of intentional norm change through collective action.

Norm change is an especially exciting area for thinking about solving problems because it can open the door to much-needed institutional change, such as the adoption of new policies or the creation of new institutions. To explore this possibility, we need an account of the way norm change affects institutional change, but our understanding of this relationship and of institutional change in general remains limited (Peters, Pierre, and King 2005; Schmidt 2008).

This paper describes two new strategies of institutional reform via intentional norm change: *normative reframing*, or the reconceptualization of an issue in terms of an alternative existing norm, and *normative innovation*, or the deliberative creation of entirely new norms. Both strategies take advantage of norms’ powerful

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influence over human behavior, their fundamentally social nature, and their ambiguity and malleability that makes them subject to deliberation and revision. Both strategies begin with the process of “foregrounding” a problematic existing norm supporting the institutional status quo: highlighting the norm’s influence over institutional rules and individual decisions and then either attacking the norm’s applicability to the relevant issue or its substantive value in general. In the first strategy, *normative reframing*, advocates promote new institutional rules as being supported by an alternative existing social norm. In the second strategy, *normative innovation*, agents of change create and promote an entirely new norm to promote alternative institutional arrangements, both formal and informal.

Two types of problems are particularly relevant to these norm-driven strategies of institutional change. First, because norms can override or condition motives of economic or material self-interest, these strategies may help solve problems that seem intractable *due to opposition to reform from powerful vested interests*. We illustrate this process of institutional change in the face of resistance from powerful interests with examples from the problem of climate change. Second, because norms are themselves subject to deliberative processes of change, these strategies may help solve problems that seem intractable *due to their roots in deeply grounded cultural practices that appear unassailable*. We illustrate this process of institutional change in the face of resistance from deeply rooted cultural practices with examples from the problem of violence against women.

We do not argue that the norm-driven strategies we present here exhaust the possibilities of norm-driven institutional change, nor do we claim they are the only pathways to change. Rather, we argue that the two strategies we discuss represent underappreciated but important mechanisms for institutional change to address seemingly intractable social problems, particularly when those problems stem from a conflict of material interests or from seemingly longstanding cultural practices and deeply ingrained habits.

Key Concepts: Connecting Formal Institutions, Informal Institutions, and Norms

Because norms and formal and informal institutions are overlapping ideas that can be difficult to disentangle, we start with a brief explanation of these concepts and their interrelationships. We define *norms* as “standards of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 891), driven by a “logic of appropriateness” aimed at conforming to social expectations or perceived practices, rather than a “logic of

consequences” aimed at maximizing one’s perceived self-interest (March and Olsen 1989). We use the term *institutions* to indicate larger and more complex constellations of social practices and rules of behavior (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 891; March and Olsen 1989; Young 1990). *Formal institutions* are constellations of explicit, official rules created and enforced by governments and other organizations such as corporations, foundations, or churches (Young 1990; Weaver and Rockman 1993). *Informal institutions*, by contrast, combine implicit rules that are “created, communicated, and enforced outside of officially sanctioned channels” to organize social behavior in some domain (Helmke and Levitsky 2004, 727). Although these definitions seem to rely on a categorical distinction between formal and informal rules, precisely delineating the categories of formal and informal is sometimes difficult (Helmke and Levitsky 2006). Indeed, a rule’s degree of formality may be better conceptualized as a continuum, as in the gradations between more precisely specified “hard” international law and the variety of forms of “soft” law and institutionalized rules governing international relations (Abbott and Snidal 2000, 421–22).

Formal and informal institutions may be composed of rules that are long standing and deeply held or of newer rules that are less well established or widely respected. More deeply embedded institutional rules (formal and informal) become reflected in the built environment (for example, in the physical construction of separate rooms for men and women to live, worship, or wash), and such material manifestations of institutional rules may persist even when formal rules change. Over time, therefore, more established and enduring institutions come to be comprised of both rules and their physical or material manifestations. Institutions, then, at a minimum are systems of rules that work together to coordinate social behavior, and these may be local or recent in provenance (Helmke and Levitsky 2006), but the most deeply embedded institutions combine formal rules, social norms, and even physical infrastructure (March and Olsen 1989; Young 1990).

Norms comprise an essential part of the creation and operation of formal and informal institutions. Norms are the source of many rules that constitute formal institutions (Posner 2000), and norms can support or obstruct compliance with formal rules (Helmke and Levitsky 2006; Tyler 2006). People in organizations tend to follow the usual practices that prevail rather than the official rules, and official rules about who wields the most influence may be irrelevant because of informal networks that empower some people in organizations rather than others (Helmke and Levitsky 2006; March and Olsen 1989). Most fundamentally, however, norms about identity and social hierarchy undergird operations in most institutions

without ever being formally articulated (March and Olsen 1989; Young 1990). Informal institutions also rely on norms for their creation and operation, and norms may constitute some or all of the informal rules that comprise informal institutions (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

Scholars of institutions have observed that formal and informal institutions interact in complex ways, reinforcing one another and also creating tensions when they are not in agreement—what Helmke and Levitsky (2006, 14) call “divergent” informal institutions. Such tension opens windows of opportunity for institutional change in either official or unofficial practices (Banaszak and Weldon 2011). Our focus, however, is less on the relationship between formal and informal institutions and more on the way that changing norms can create the potential for institutional change by creating *divergent norms*. When new or alternative norms compete with existing norms, there may be an opportunity to change institutions if a new informal rule can replace the old one. In this respect, it is important to note that norms (and the informal institutions they comprise) may compete or diverge not only with formal institutions, but also with each other.

In sum, because formal and informal institutions rely on social coordination through norms to generate public support and compliance, institutions that are inconsistent with prevailing social norms may be less effective or more vulnerable to challenge. When such inconsistencies can be highlighted, new opportunities for institutional change emerge. In the next section, we briefly describe the characteristics of norms most relevant for understanding this process of norm-driven institutional change.

Norm Characteristics Most Relevant for Creating Institutional Change

The power of norms in shaping human behavior is widely recognized across the social sciences (Cialdini, Kallgren, and Reno 1991; Ostrom 1998; Sripada and Stich 2007). People everywhere exhibit a capacity at a young age to discern and adopt prevailing rules about appropriateness, manifesting a particular sensitivity to social opprobrium and convention. Some even argue for the existence of domain-specific cognitive machinery dedicated to learning norms, and contend that brain development makes it difficult for human beings to change norm-driven behaviors or learn new rules after a certain age (Sripada and Stich 2007). The ubiquity and taken-for-granted quality of norms is the key to understanding why norm-driven behavior can sometimes seem so resistant to change. Often, people persist in following norms even when the required behavior presents considerable costs to them, thus frustrating policymakers relying on coercion or incentives to change behavior. In this regard, some norm-driven behavior can seem nearly impossible to change.

However, a closer look reveals that norms and the identities on which they depend are actually quite malleable. Most norms are socially learned rather than innately specified (Sherif and Sherif 1953), and although the propensity to learn and follow norms seems universal, there is no obvious set of norms that is universally applied (Sripada and Stich 2007). Rather, appropriate practices are contingent on a person’s identity and differ across societies and social contexts (Crandall, Eshelman, and O’Brien 2002; O’Donnell 2006). In some sense, norms are community conventions about how different classes of people should act and clearly change over time (Chudek and Henrich 2011, 1).

Changing the norms governing a particular situation or issue, then, is a possible point of intervention for political actors seeking institutional change. People can sometimes change the norms that are seen to apply to a particular situation, or even develop new norms, through contestation and argument; that is, through *discursive politics* (Clark 2001; Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Katzenstein 1995; Sikkink 2011). This amenability to change through discursive politics makes norms valuable levers of institutional change: by changing norms, reformers can create pressure to change existing institutional rules to make them more consistent with new or alternative norms. In some cases, this pressure is sufficient to pressure decision makers to change formal rules, despite opposition by powerful vested interests who otherwise may dominate the “micro-politics” of formal rule making through so-called iron triangles or subgovernments—close-knit and low-profile partnerships between regulated firms and a few key policy makers (Baumgartner and Jones 1993; Lowi 1979).

In the sections below, we explain how norms are affected by discursive politics. First, we explain how prevailing norms for a given issue can be weakened through discursive scrutiny. Second, we outline two strategies for replacing prevailing norms with alternatives: *normative reframing* (appealing to a different, extant norm) and *normative innovation* (rejecting the old norm altogether and developing new rules of behavior). Third, we explain how new or alternative norms are disseminated to new jurisdictions or communities.

Norm-driven Change Part I: Weakening Norms Through Discursive Scrutiny

Many norms operate implicitly or unconsciously, guiding behavior in ways that are not fully recognized or understood by the individuals they influence. Because they usually operate in the background, structuring habitual and taken-for-granted types of behavior, these norms can be both powerful and overlooked. Drawing conscious

attention to norms and subjecting them to scrutiny can make us aware of choices we are making every day of which we had previously been unaware. This greater self-awareness and scrutiny, in turn, can be an important step toward changing the behavior prompted by the norm.

Norms can also be challenged, highlighted, or weakened through purposive norm violation. As Sikkink (2011) notes, the “logic of appropriateness,” which is so helpful in characterizing norm dynamics, fails to capture the ways that human rights activists actively transform political and social practice. Such actors may draw attention to their issues by *failing* to conform to extant norms, advocating new, unconventional practices by specifically seeking to *disrupt* the logic of appropriateness. Indeed, social movement scholars emphasize the importance of disruption for calling attention to problematic practices or ideas (Katzenstein 1998).

This process of foregrounding and reflecting on a norm may inspire reevaluation that weakens the norm’s influence (Petty and Cacioppo 1986). For example, Becker and Swim (2012) found that after being made aware of and contemplating the norms shaping their actions, some people (women more than men) adjusted their behavior to avoid sexist practices. Those seeking to weaken a norm outline the ways in which the norm is unreasonable, harmful, inconsistent with other norms, or inappropriately applied to this issue. Even a weakened norm, however, will persist if no alternative is offered in its place. To be successful, the undermining of an old norm must be paired with an organized constituency promoting a new alternative norm (Legro 2000; Mackie 1998). We turn to an explication of two major strategies available to these agents of change in the next section.

Norm-driven Change Part II: Two Strategies for Offering Alternative Norms

Having weakened an existing norm, advocates for social change have two primary options for promoting alternative norms. In one approach, they can highlight the unconvincing “fit” of the existing norm to the relevant issue and then “reframe” the issue in terms of an alternative norm that they argue is more appropriately applied to this context—a process we refer to as *normative reframing*. If successful with this reframing strategy, reformers will succeed in persuading key decision makers and the public to think of the social problem in terms of this alternative norm, thereby recommending alternative institutional arrangements. Alternatively, the issue may not be a question of the fit of an existing norm to the issue but rather may require replacing the existing norm with an entirely new standard of appropriate behavior via a collective and deliberative process we

call *normative innovation*. If successful, advocates will create and disseminate an original social norm to govern behavior on this issue, one that will lead directly to institutional change. In this section, we describe these two possible strategies of norm-driven institutional change in greater detail.

Normative Reframing: Using Alternative Norms to Promote Institutional Change

Some norms exert greater influence on behavior and judgment than others. This degree of influence over behavior is partially a product of a norm’s *strength*, as indicated by its breadth of support and the general difficulty individuals have in violating the norm. It is also partially a product of a norm’s perceived applicability, or *fit*, with a specific decision context. We consider both factors here in discussing the strategy of normative reframing to promote an alternative norm in support of institutional change.

Normative strength. In general, those seeking institutional change will want to draw on the strongest norms possible to support their proposed reforms; that is, norms that are widely and deeply held, and therefore most difficult for people to violate. Some scholars argue that certain types of norms tend to be more influential in changing behavior than others. For example, “moral” norms appealing to ethical or religious justifications are seen to be especially influential due to their deep-rooted nature and resistance to compromise (Clark 2001; Elster 2007).¹

In addition, certain kinds of norms may be *more* compelling to individuals when subject to conscious deliberation and scrutiny, while others may be more vulnerable to discursive criticism. For instance, some have argued that assertions of human rights based on “short causal chains” or preventing serious bodily injury appear to have a more compelling character across many individuals and societies (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Internal logical consistency, or logical consistency with other widely held norms, may also make a norm more persuasive when subjected to conscious deliberation in this regard.

Regardless of whether we can identify the specific qualities of stronger norms, however, there is little disputing the idea that normative strength varies substantially. All things being equal, supporters of institutional reform will want to use the strongest norms possible to support their proposals, in terms of the norm’s *actual influence* over behavior as well as the norm’s apparent *persuasive power* when subjected to conscious reflection.

Normative fit. The applicability of norms is often ambiguous; people frequently must apply a fairly general “grammar” of principles to an array of new situations where the

appropriate rule is not self-evident (Mikhail 2011; Stich 2012). Different potentially applicable norms may recommend conflicting actions, and people may follow a norm without consciously reflecting on the full range of alternative norms that could apply to the behavioral choice in question. When made aware of the norm they are applying to a specific issue or behavior, individuals may then be persuaded that the norm does not actually apply to the situation very well.

This ambiguity creates a question of “normative fit,” or how well a norm seems to apply to the particular issue. In this regard, the idea of normative fit is significantly psychological—it relies on a decision-maker’s judgment about the norm’s applicability to this case, as well as his or her assessment of how others will evaluate the norm’s applicability. Evaluations of normative fit are therefore a second important component of a norm’s influence over an individual’s behavior: All things being equal, norms that are judged to fit more closely to a decision should exercise greater influence than those seen to have a weaker fit.

At the same time, judgments of normative fit are also subject to change through discursive processes. One important way to promote an alternative norm as having a better fit for a given issue is to apply a different *issue frame*. Issue frames are specific “conceptualizations” of an issue (Chong and Druckman 2007) that “spell out the essence of the problem” in different ways (Nelson and Kinder 1996, 1057). For example, public support for permitting a march by a hate group has been shown to vary if the march is framed in terms of being an issue of “free speech” versus an issue of “public safety” (Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997). Different issue frames have also been shown to influence public support for policies ranging from gay rights (Brewer 2003) to government spending (Jacoby 2000).

Normative reframing occurs when change advocates promulgate a new frame presenting the issue in terms of an alternative norm. Experimental work has confirmed that new frames can “cue” different norms for individuals, changing behavior in situations that are otherwise identical (Ostrom 1998). People will view some norms as more persuasively applied to a given issue than others, making those norms more effective in shaping behavior (Benford and Snow 2000; Chudek and Henrich 2011). For example, the widely followed norm “always tip for good service” is appropriate in a restaurant, but is inappropriately applied (that is, has a poor fit) to service provided in your family or friend’s house, where leaving money on the table would likely be seen as an insult (Ariely 2009).

Social movements use reframing as a strategy for social change, often recasting issues in moral terms such as *justice or fairness* (Benford and Snow 2000; Sikkink

2011). Indeed, social movement scholars talk about a frame’s “empirical credibility” with the public as an important determinant of its influence on behavior, where credibility is defined as the “apparent fit between the framings and events in the world” (Benford and Snow 2000, 620). Thus, for social movement theorists, demonstrating a fit between a frame and “events in the world” might mean drawing a correspondence between actors or identities referenced in the frame and those present in the situation in question, or it could focus on whether the facts of the issue at hand match the conditions under which the norm is expected to apply. For example, the question of whether a norm of equal treatment fits a particular issue could turn on whether the people under consideration are seen as full members of a society to whom the norm applies, while the fit of a norm of justified self-defense may depend on specific conditions in a given interpersonal conflict.

Thus, a norm’s overall influence on behavior or attitudes will vary in terms of its strength and its perceived fit. Political advocates will often seek to portray an issue in terms of the strongest norms possible—such as human rights norms, or norms of free speech—to maximize leverage. Yet, there are limits on the ability to fit a particular norm to a particular issue—some norms will apply in a more persuasive manner than others to a given situation, creating a tradeoff between norm strength and norm fit for those seeking the best norm to support their preferred institutional arrangement. Advocates engaged in normative reframing foreground the weakness of the fit between a norm supporting the status quo policy and promote an alternative frame applying a norm that more convincingly fits the issue. By foregrounding the weakness of fit of a norm supporting the institutional status quo, change advocates can reduce support for current rules, and help mobilize public and elite support for institutional change.

Normative Innovation: Creating New Norms

When problematic social norms unequivocally apply to an issue and set of corresponding institutions, a different strategy for institutional change is required, one we call *normative innovation*. Here, advocates must attack and change the norm itself, rather than the norm’s fit to the issue. Most importantly, they must create a new rule of behavior to replace the problematic norm. Creating a new norm can be accomplished through a collective, deliberative approach to developing alternative standards of appropriate behavior. This may occur prior to any effort to disseminate this entirely new norm.

Such normative innovation can lead to remarkable transformations in a society’s informal and formal institutional structures over time. First, by changing norms that

are part of existing informal institutions, the new norms can begin to change informal institutions themselves. In addition, generating new norms can also provide opportunities for changing formal institutions. When new norms conflict with existing formal rules, political actors may seize the opportunity to argue for reforms that bring formal rules in line with informal rules, or vice versa. When these new norms make old, accepted behaviors seem problematic, they can put new issues on the public agenda, constructing new problems that command public support (Kingdon 1984; Nelson 1986). Thus, new norms can provide opportunities for formal and informal institutional changes.

Although some may dispute the possibility of creating a truly “new” norm, it seems evident that behaviors sometimes come to be governed by a new rule or set of rules, in a manner best described as the creation of a new norm. In cases where an extant rule is explicitly rejected as being inappropriate in all circumstances, an old norm is being rejected and a new norm is being adopted. Sometimes, old rules are rejected or dropped. Unless we contend that the “stock” of extant norms is constant, it seems clear that the inventory of norms must change over time to include some new rules of behavior. New norms, as new standards of behavior, also often require the creation of *new categories and concepts*, suggesting that they are quite different from the process of simply applying an alternative norm to a new situation.

Collective action, especially deliberation, is an important but mostly unrecognized mechanism for this process of purposive norm creation. The suffragettes, for instance, collectively developed, refined, disputed, and agreed on their new norms about women’s rights in a series of overlapping discussions (e.g., Weiss 2009). Although individuals such as Susan B. Anthony played a vital role (e.g., Finnemore and Sikkink 1998), it is crucial to recognize the importance of the larger group who helped create the norms that these leaders promoted.

People often cooperate in smaller groups to devise new norms before they seek to persuade other communities and individuals of their value. The motivation for discussion is to find a new way of thinking about a problem, but the content and outcome is indeterminate. These deliberations may fail, or produce nothing, or produce multiple ideas. Often, participants are not sure what the outcome should look like, and may even be skeptical of their deliberative counterparts. Indeed, meaningful deliberations often require that participants overcome internal division, lack of trust, and conflicting interests in the process. The outcome of these discussions is unknown at the outset: The content emerges from the discussion.

Such discussions are more likely to produce new norms that will successfully displace old ones where deliberations are more inclusive. This means ensuring

that marginalized groups are present and there is some place for, and expectation of, dissent. Last, where deliberants can affirm their distinctive identities as part of the deliberative process, by organizing separately or speaking as a group, norms that emerge will be more reflective of the diversity of participants, and will involve wider and more enthusiastic support (Weldon 2006, 2011).

Social movements of disadvantaged groups often use these sorts of discussions to create new identities and model new social practices (Fraser 1992, 1995; Mansbridge and Morris 2001; Weldon 2006). Indeed, what are now widespread practices (in some places) such as recycling, observing Kwanzaa, declining use of racial slurs, gender neutral language, child care centers, and other forms of what people sometimes deride as “political correctness” began as such innovative practices in model communities. New communities are critical for modeling new rules of behavior to help everyday people understand what the new rule means or entails, and that it is possible to follow a different rule.

In sum, a specific form of collective action—deliberation about norms—is critical for norm creation for at least two reasons. First, deliberation helps to reach agreement across difference in developing the specific content of the new norm (which is important for generating support for that norm), and second, joint action protects the small groups who first adopt behavior consistent with these new standards of appropriate behavior, and helps to leverage their actions to produce greater influence. This is fundamentally a creative, open-ended process that aims at finding new rules of behavior to replace problematic existing norms.

Norm-driven Change Part III: Disseminating New or Alternative Norms

Norm-driven institutional change also requires spreading awareness of and building support for a new or alternative norm. Through this process of norm dissemination or “diffusion,” reformers strengthen their ability to use the new norm to change institutional arrangements. Diffusion can be thought of as comprising at least two distinct stages. Initially, a minority group embraces a new or alternative norm and seeks to spread its adoption to the majority (Crano and Hemovich 2011). At this stage, discussion, deliberation, and argument (including the specific way the issue or norm is framed) are more important for success in persuading the broader group. At a later stage, after some tipping point when a critical mass has adopted the new practice, norms will often spread more quickly in a sort of “cascade” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Sikkink 2011). Here, imitation may play a larger role. Finally, early institutional reforms can

further speed the diffusion process through a positive feedback loop between new official incentives and sanctions encouraging compliance with the new norm, and growing public acceptance of the internal rationale for the new behavior(s).

Dissemination through Persuasion and Imitation: Injunctive vs. Descriptive Norms

In most cases, the process of norm dissemination starts with *persuasion*—continuing the discursive process that foregrounded and criticized the use of the old norm to dictate behavior and institutional rules for this issue. In this regard, early stages of norm dissemination tend to rely on so-called injunctive norms: prescriptive rules of appropriate behavior based on arguments about how a person *should* behave, or how she would like others to behave. Because they rely on persuasion, injunctive norms are especially relevant in the early stages of norm development to motivate “first adopters” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, 898; Risse 2000).

Substantial research has also documented the importance of imitation in norm adoption (e.g., Friedman 2012b; Simmons 2009, 89; Sripada and Stich 2007), especially in the later stages of norm dissemination. In these later stages, *descriptive norms*, or behavioral rules based on perceptions of what most people actually do, can take on greater importance (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Although they tend to get less attention from political scientists, descriptive norms are very effective at promoting a desired behavior (Swim et al. 2011). In one study, for instance, subjects seeing a card indicating that 80% of the people previously staying in the same hotel room chose to reuse their towels were more likely to reuse their own towels, compared to subjects seeing a card offering environmental reasons promoting the same behavior (Schultz, Khazian, and Zaleski 2008). In general, when communities or groups decide collectively to change practices, individuals may follow the new group norm even if they are not fully persuaded about the wisdom of the new practice (Crandall, Eshleman, and O’Brien 2002, 361; see also Mackie 1998; Henrich & Gil-White 2001).

Imitation may be driven by a desire for conformity, or it may be more reliant on emulation: people may be more likely to adopt norms that are modeled by high-status individuals (Henrich and Gil-White 2001). Celebrities, athletes, business leaders, and other prominent or widely admired people inspire others to imitate their ideas and acts. Influential role models may also vary based on perceived identity groups. Certain countries, for example, may be particularly influential in generating wider adoption of new international norms among their peers:

Friedman (2012a), for example, argues that Spain’s adoption of a law on gay marriage was critical in prompting the adoption of a similar law on gay marriage in Argentina. Thus, social reformers can more effectively disseminate new practices and new ideas by persuading key opinion leaders or role models to publicly adopt a new practice, or even to espouse it.

Although imitation may be more important to norm diffusion when norms are more established or widespread, both imitation and persuasion remain relevant at all stages of norm creation and diffusion, and these stages of the “norm life-cycle” bleed into each other, overlap and recur. In sum, norm dissemination should be thought of as an ongoing process involving imitation and persuasion (Krook and True 2010).

Internal vs. External Motivations: Using Incentives to Disseminate Norms

As reviewed above, *internal motivations* for norm compliance can be quite powerful, as in the case where a person follows a norm because it fits their image of themselves or because they believe in a particular practice or principle. At the same time, *external motivations*, such as incentives, punishments or other sanctions, are also important to norm compliance. Informal sanctions for norm violation, such as shaming, negative gossip, or extra-legal punishments, are a powerful form of enforcing and maintaining social norms (Elster 2007; Ostrom 1998). In addition, governments and other institutions sometimes rely on incentives or the threat of punishment to enforce behavior consistent with norms, and these government actions may help to disseminate new practices. In some cases, *norm internalization*, or adherence to a norm based on internal motivations, may follow from behavior change initially driven by external motivations for compliance (Avdeyeva 2009; Clark 2013). In other cases, external incentives appear to have little impact without concurrent efforts to promote internal motivations for compliance.

This suggests that strategies to promote new norms are more effective when they focus on external and internal motivations, such as creating new incentives through changes in formal institutions while also focusing on grassroots strategies aimed at persuasion and imitation to internalize the new norm. When new policies challenge norms that are more embedded or foundational (i.e., are connected to a wide array of other norms and other areas of social practice), they may spark more resistance. Especially when policies seek to change such foundational behaviors, they may need to be connected to broader processes of mobilization and grassroots persuasion to be effective (Helmke and Levitsky 2006).

Eventually, compliance with new norms may be completely internalized, achieving the same “taken for granted” status of the old norm having been replaced.

Types of Institutions for Which Norm-driven Institutional Change Shows Promise

We provide examples of these two strategies of norm-driven institutional change with reference to two prominent social problems: climate change and violence against women. We focus on these problems because they offer excellent examples of norm-driven institutional change even in the face of opposition by *powerful vested interests*, or by *strong, taken-for-granted existing norms*, both of which are important obstacles to institutional change in a wide range of cases.

Both strategies for institutional change rely on the ability to identify an important social norm that supports the status quo but is vulnerable to criticism. If those seeking reform are unable to identify and effectively criticize the normative basis of the institutional rule they seek to change, these strategies will be of little use. Given the widely recognized influence of norms on formal and informal institutions, however, it is likely that many institutional arrangements will have normative bases that are vulnerable to critique. In particular, wherever institutional practices are in conflict with strong social norms, there is greater potential for the application of the strategies we outline. Thus, these strategies are potentially important in a wide range of circumstances beyond the two cases we use for illustration here. For example, in the United States, formal laws on marriage and sexuality in many places still restrict same-sex marriage and sexuality, while social norms on these matters have changed dramatically. This divergence explains why there has been so much policy change and even constitutional reform in these areas over the past 20 years.

In addition, we have already noted how many scholars cite the powerful influence of vested interests in the design and maintenance of formal and informal institutions as an impediment to institutional change. Where powerful organized interests oppose such change, reformers may need to turn to the power of ideas as alternative levers of change. Thus, strategies for norm-driven institutional change are likely to be especially relevant in cases where vested interests have succeeded in maintaining an institutional status quo that serves their economic self-interest. We illustrate the use of normative reframing to overcome opposition to institutional reform by vested interests in our discussion of climate change.

In other cases, social reformers may come to understand that opposition to changing institutions, both

formal and informal, stems directly from certain deeply held but harmful, oppressive, or otherwise undesirable social or cultural norms that comprise the institutions. In this case the process of normative innovation is required, to replace the problematic norm with new standards of appropriate behavior, thereby generating new informal and formal institutional rules. We illustrate the use of normative innovation in our discussion of violence against women.

Climate Change: Normative Reframing to Overcome Vested Interests

Climate change is the problem of higher concentrations of so-called greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere, due primarily to human burning of fossil fuels. Most scientists are concerned about the resulting higher levels of energy trapped in the earth’s climate system by these higher GHG concentrations, expecting them to lead to a wide range of disruptive changes in the ecological systems that support human and nonhuman life (IPCC 2007). Political efforts to address this problem to date have had limited success, leaving experts in search of alternative approaches (Victor 2011). A prominent explanation for the failure to make progress in changing institutions to address this issue is the power of economic interests threatened by many of the potential solutions (Bryner 2008). Thus, climate change is an excellent example of an issue where institutional reform to address a difficult problem has been seriously obstructed by powerful vested interests.

Many advocates have used normative reframing to advance institutional reform on this issue in the face of this formidable opposition. For example, activists have reframed the extremely unequal levels of emissions by wealthy and poor societies as a violation of basic human rights norms. This reframing often recommends a more egalitarian distribution of permissible global emissions of GHGs (Agarwal and Narain 1991). More recent variations on this line of argument distinguish emissions in terms of Amartya Sen’s and Martha Nussbaum’s “capabilities” approach, which conceptualizes human well-being in terms of various critical “functions,” including subsistence, recreation, education, and personal freedom (Holland 2012). A growing international climate justice movement has mobilized to try to disseminate the new conceptualization of climate change as subject to prominent human rights norms (Roberts and Parks 2007). Although these efforts have yet to translate into major institutional breakthroughs in terms of the international and national rules governing climate change mitigation and adaptation, they have changed the dynamics of

international negotiations regarding rules to address climate change (Hochstetler 2012).

Environmental activists have also used normative reframing to reform institutional rules governing climate policy in the United States in the face of opposition from powerful economic interests. Starting in the 1990s, market-based policies became a dominant approach to dealing with many forms of air pollution in the United States, including GHG emissions responsible for climate change. Prior to 2008, these policies always gave away newly created emissions rights to existing polluters for free, consistent with a common norm granting resource ownership based on beneficial prior use (Raymond 2003). This allocation method was supported by the strong political influence of large economic actors receiving their emissions allowances at no cost, in some cases resulting in substantial private profits (Burtraw and Palmer 2008). Standard analyses of the design and implementation of these policies based on theories of interest group politics suggested that there was little chance of this practice changing in the future (Cook 2010; Joskow and Schmalensee 1998).

In 2003, a small group of environmental reformers chose to pressure government leaders creating a new market-based program to control GHG emissions in the Northeastern United States to change this institutional arrangement. Rather than giving emissions rights away to polluters, these advocates argued that the institutional rules for this new cap-and-trade program known as the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative (RGGI) should require polluters to pay for these emissions rights. This small group of environmental activists immediately seized on the weakness of the fit between the norm supporting ownership based on beneficial prior use and the institutional rule of giving pollution allowances away. The norm was traditionally applied to situations where beneficial labor created additional value in a resource, such as farming or extracting valuable resources from land. Pollution, by contrast, was clearly a harmful activity, calling the applicability of a norm rewarding beneficial prior use into serious question. In other words, by foregrounding the implicit reliance on a norm rewarding *beneficial* labor as justification for giving away allowances based on a *harmful* activity (pollution), environmental advocates destabilized the political status quo (Raymond 2011).

Having pointed out the weak fit of the existing normative frame with current policy, these advocates then reframed the issue in terms of strong alternative norms favoring equal entitlements to shared public resources and requiring polluters to pay for their actions—norms they believed would be seen as fitting better with the issue. Eventually, they succeeded in persuading state regulators and elected officials of the better applicability of these alternative norms for this case, and the new

institutional arrangements those norms implied. Part of this argument required convincing elected officials that their constituents would also see the issue more persuasively in terms of the alternative norms favoring the sale of these allowances, and designing the new institutional rules to be consistent with those alternative, egalitarian norms by dedicating revenue from the sale of emissions allowances to programs benefiting the public at large through assistance for low-income electricity consumers, or subsidies for energy efficiency improvements to homes and businesses. The effectiveness of these arguments is conveyed by public endorsements of auctioning by political leaders such as New York's Attorney General using the same framing language promoted by environmentalists (Raymond 2011).

Consistent with prior experience and the expectations of interest group theories, power generators resisted these proposed changes, succeeding at one point in getting Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney to withdraw from the program in December 2005. At the same time, interviews with key participants in the RGGI design process, including several from state agencies and the power generating sector, confirmed that the new normative frame put industry on the defensive and made the idea of auctioning allowances more politically viable (Raymond 2011). While other factors also played a role in this policy change, including the deregulation of the electricity industry in the mid-1990s, it is important to note that the same group of states failed to express any interest in auctioning allowances for a similar nitrogen oxide trading program from 1996 to 1999 (Farrell 2001). Reframing, in short, made it possible to seriously consider in 2003 what was still largely unthinkable in the late 1990s under a very similar set of circumstances.

As a result, these new normative frames were crucial in the enactment of a leading U.S. climate change policy forcing polluters to pay for nearly all their emissions rights (Raymond 2010). Every major market-based climate policy since that time has also embraced a new model of demanding that polluters pay for their rights to pollute (Betsill and Hoffman 2011). In this manner, a small group of policy entrepreneurs were able to create a dramatic institutional change in the face of long-standing opposition by politically powerful industries, a change that experts previously considered politically impossible.

As noted previously, new ideas are most likely to displace old ones when they are actively supported by some constituency (Legro 2000), so policies with a weak normative fit will persist if there is no agent for change. In addition, policies supported by strong material interests will be harder to change, all things being equal. At the same time, the RGGI experience indicates that by promoting a new normative frame, activists can sometimes

overcome powerful material interests opposed to change by foregrounding the unpersuasive applicability of the norm justifying the current institutional arrangement, and presenting an alternative norm as a more sensible way of approaching the problem. Although there are no guarantees this strategy will succeed in every context, these examples indicate that normative reframing can offer a promising path toward institutional change.

Violence Against Women: Normative Innovation to Challenge Problematic Norms

Many people now think most forms of violence against women (VAW) ought to be crimes and see them as a violation of human rights, but this was not always the case. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* fails to mention VAW, although it does touch on other gender issues such as family law. Even the United Nations' *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW), as presented to the intergovernmental meeting at Copenhagen in 1980, did not mention VAW as a priority for action (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Weldon 2006).

Today, VAW is undisputedly a matter of human rights and an important aspect of women's rights. It has gone from an area judged to be outside the purview of international human rights organizations to an area that is *assumed* to be a core dimension of human rights. This "taken-for-granted" quality, a hallmark of norms, seemed a long way off in 1992 when none of the international human rights NGOs made such abuses a core area of their work, instead viewing such violations as private, inappropriate areas for human rights activism (Bunch 1990; Friedman 1995; Htun and Weldon 2012; Weldon 2006). Twenty years later, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the other major Human Rights NGOs all have women's rights projects.

Changing norms and laws regarding domestic violence against women similarly reflect this development (Htun and Weldon 2012; Weldon 2002). The proportion of Europeans who thought domestic violence against women should be considered a crime grew between 1999 and 2010 (Eurobarometer 2010). Similarly, at one time it was seen as legally impossible for a man to rape his wife and until the 1970s husbands were routinely exempted from prosecutions for rape, even when separated or divorced (Stetson 1997, 308, 312). In 1993 marital rape became a crime in all 50 U.S. states under the sexual offenses code, a remarkable shift in formal institutions that reflected a sea change in U.S. norms regarding VAW.² These attitudinal and legal changes replaced a norm of masculine dominance that failed to censure sexual violence against wives with a new norm that made such violence against women in the family unacceptable.

There seems to be no better way of describing these transformations than the intentional creation and propagation of new norms. Some might suggest that this example involves the application of an old norm such as "treat people with respect" or "don't torture or physically abuse people" to a new group ("women"). But this is strained in comparison with just accepting that this is, in fact, a new norm. These activists did not simply expand an existing norm into an area where no normative rules were present. There was a norm governing the old behavior, and the new norm is the *opposite* of the previous rule for acceptable behavior. In addition, the norm in question is much more specific than these other more general norms about respect or physical abuse, requiring specific reversals of powerful behavioral expectations. Finally, unlike the case of normative reframing just discussed, these advocates *explicitly rejected* an existing norm rather than saying it was a "poor fit" for a given behavior or decision.

Moreover, this case illustrates how new norms involve the creation of *new categories and concepts* (for example, the concept of violence against women). Before issues such as female genital mutilation (FGM), domestic violence, sexual assault, sexual harassment, dowry deaths, honor killings, and other forms of VAW could be contested as a violation of a new human rights norm, activists had to draw attention to these problems and redefine them as unjust violations, as opposed to culturally valued practices, "facts of life," or the fault of the victims. Most importantly, creating the very category of VAW by drawing new connections between these diverse forms of violence was something that had to precede formal institutional reforms, such as the 1993 UN Declaration on VAW. In addition, the understanding of human rights itself had to be transformed to include violations previously seen as private and beyond the purview of human rights bodies (Bunch 1990; Friedman 1995; Weldon 2006). We discuss the process of the creation and diffusion of new norms related to VAW in greater detail below.

Creating New VAW Norms

As noted, activists transformed social and political practices in the area of VAW through a creative, deliberative process through which women's organizations consciously created and developed the very concept of VAW. Examining 36 stable democracies from 1974 to 1994, Weldon (2002) finds that in each of these instances it was strong, autonomous women's movements that first articulated the issue of violence against women. The new norms emerged from organized groups of activists deliberating about problems they confronted as women (Weldon 2006). In North America, for example, women met in so-called consciousness raising groups, to consider and criticize sexist norms. In these groups, women *collectively* developed analyses of social problems, devising new

social practices, models and ways of living (Brownmiller 1999; Elman 1996; Lakeman 2005; Rebick 2005).

Activists used protest and critical discussion to foreground and challenge problematic extant norms on VAW. Feminists held speak-outs and take-back-the-night marches to elicit attention; they also used shame and ridicule to embarrass those who did not take rape seriously, and to point out the unacceptability of treating physical violence with levity (Weldon 2011). At the 1993 UN Conference on Human Rights, testimonials by women from all over the world describing their experiences of violence broke taboos against speaking out on the subject, and drew attention to the ubiquity of violent behavior supported by norms of masculine dominance, and the resulting harms that behavior had caused (Friedman 1995).

In addition to criticizing the usual ways of seeing VAW, activists offered new models of relationships and rules for governing personal and sexual relationships. For example, a common protest chant for anti-rape activists is "However I dress/wherever I go/yes means yes/and NO MEANS NO!" This new norm replaces the widely held belief that women "say no when they mean yes" in sexual matters.

In the international movement against VAW, it took activists nearly two decades to create norms that would undergird the influential campaign mounted in 1993 resulting in the first intergovernmental Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (United Nations 1993). Beginning in the early 1970s, activists sought to come together across borders to address "crimes against women." But disagreement and conflict prevented coordinated action until activists were able to develop a conceptualization of VAW that included FGM, state violence against women, dowry deaths, domestic abuse, sexual assault, stalking, and other forms of abuse. Bringing these violations under a single conceptual umbrella provided a basis for solidarity among women who previously had been divided by debates over a specific issue, such as FGM or dowry deaths. Activists had to work to overcome mistrust and social inequality to forge a united campaign (Weldon 2006). Understanding that norm creation is a political process that requires collective action points our attention to the challenges to norm creation that contexts of inequality, mistrust, and social differences present.

Coordinated social action also provides critical protection against the sanctions applied to those violating old norms before new norms have taken hold. (As noted, individual norm violators are vulnerable to being ostracized, ridiculed, or even subjected to violence by members of the larger group seeking to punish inappropriate behavior and enforce conformity). For example, one obstacle that opponents of FGM encountered was the idea that female circumcision was necessary to maintain respectability and marriageability. A key element of convincing parents not

to practice FGM on their daughters was creating a community of parents who said their sons would marry such women (Mackie 1998; World Bank 2004; see also Helmke and Levitsky 2006, 25).

Disseminating new VAW norms

Combating violence against women has also required disseminating new norms created in these deliberative processes. For example, one of Australia's widely cited public education campaigns of the 1990s promoted new norms of masculinity by emphasizing that "real men do not rape or bash women." Similarly, in the global "man-up" campaign, prominent male and female athletes called on the public to "man-up" and stop VAW.

Similar patterns have occurred internationally in terms of adopting VAW norms: after a critical mass of states in a region adopted a norm against violence, the remaining states in the region were far more likely to adopt this norm (Htun and Weldon 2012). This may be because regional norms are closer to the national context in terms of identity, and make it clear that countries "like ours" adopt particular practices about VAW. Role models and identity, then, likely play a key part in this process.

External motivations also sometimes play a role in the dissemination of VAW norms. Avdeyeva (2012) shows that states adopting new norms on VAW to accede to the EU appear to have later internalized and maintained these norms even after the external incentives were no longer relevant. On the other hand, some external incentives have had little impact without efforts to create internal motivations as well. For example, laws on FGM were most effective when coupled with efforts to challenge commonly held beliefs supporting the practice and to informally offer alternative practices and models (Boyle and Corle 2010). So internal and external motivations, when combined, can be a powerful force for behavior change.

Conclusion and Implications

Focusing on the ways that people can *intentionally* change the norms that apply to a given issue generates new strategies for procuring institutional reforms addressing enduring social challenges. Taking such a perspective, we have described two distinct ways that new or alternative norms can "make change" in existing institutions. First, policy entrepreneurs and social movements can use the strategy of *normative reframing* to invoke alternative norms for a given issue, thereby creating new opportunities for institutional reform. Second, policy entrepreneurs and social movements can use a strategy of *normative innovation* to create and disseminate new norms, spreading new ways of seeing problems and new behaviors in relation to those problems, thereby

undermining and sometimes even directly changing formal and informal institutions supported and constituted by these problematic norms.

Our discussion illustrates how these strategies are applicable at a wide range of scales, from the local to the international. For example, we noted the international use of these strategies to challenge the institutional status quo by transnational activists promoting climate justice and VAW as a human rights issue, as well as subnational efforts by environmental activists in the RGGI case to promote a new norm of equal entitlement to the atmosphere, and national and local efforts by feminist activists to promote new norms against VAW. In addition, these efforts at norm-driven institutional change may be nested in important and complicated ways, such as the influence of international movements to redefine VAW on national and subnational efforts to promote specific norms about the appropriate treatment of women, or the apparent global impacts of RGGI's adoption of new institutional rules to auction allowances, which have since been imitated in other states and nations. There are many other potential areas where we might see our strategies apply on a global scale: norm innovation could be used to change ideas about citizenship or nationality, potentially transforming global regimes or other systems of governance, while normative reframing could be used to reconceptualize an issue of national sovereignty as one of human rights, or vice versa. In addition, political globalization, or the development of formal and informal institutions of governance, may make global norms easier to develop and disseminate.

Although we concentrated our discussion on two seemingly intractable problems, climate change and violence against women, we argue that these new strategies have the potential to help make change across a wide range of other policy challenges, where vested interests or strong existing norms obstruct institutional reform. In addition to climate change, for example, other institutional arrangements supported by powerful interests that harm individual health and well-being show particular promise for the norm-based strategies we describe here. Substantial changes in formal institutional rules related to smoking in the past few decades in the United States can be attributed in part to a coordinated and deliberate effort to reframe the issue from norms favoring personal freedom to those favoring individual health, despite the strenuous objections of the tobacco lobby. Groups attacking the problem of hunger have reframed the issue in terms of a "human right" to sufficient food for everyone regardless of income or social status, in order to challenge current policies focused on supplying food primarily as a market commodity (Messer and Cohen 2012).

Similarly, we believe the strategy of norm innovation has potential for transforming institutional rules beyond

the domain of women's rights. Many seemingly intractable problems are grounded in similarly deep-seated norms that invite a similar strategy for reform, including immigration reform, gay marriage, or other issues that directly engage with established cultural norms. In recent efforts to change institutional rules related to immigration in many nations, for instance, conflicting norms of "fairness" as well as questions of identity in terms of what it means to be a citizen of a particular country have made progress difficult. Identifying and promoting new or alternative norms of citizenship or nationality, or even further eroding the role of nation states in global governance, might help to address this issue. Research has also suggested that conflicts over the institution of capital punishment might be mitigated by reframing the issue in terms of an alternative norm stating that no innocent person should ever be put to death, rather than the norm that it is wrong for the state to kill its citizens under any circumstances (Baumgartner, De Boef, and Boydston 2008).

This is not to suggest that normative reframing or innovation are the only paths toward institutional change in the face of challenges from vested interests or existing social norms, nor that they are guaranteed of success in all situations. In some cases, institutional arrangements that serve powerful interests or that embody and are supported by strong cultural norms will be difficult to change even with the norm-based strategies described here. In many situations, however, a focus on norms offers a unique opportunity to challenge institutions that are highly resistant to change. Better understanding how advocates *have already used these norm-based strategies for social change* should help improve our theories of institutional change in general, and provide additional evidence of how the study of norms and informal institutions can make political science and other disciplines more useful for understanding the causes of and potential solutions to serious policy challenges.

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Notes

1. Some may question whether moral norms make up a cross-culturally stable or theoretically important category of norms (Kelly et al. 2007), but even these scholars would likely accept the idea that some norms are more deeply and widely held in a given society than others, making them harder to violate and more influential.
2. Feminist critics observe that spousal rape is still treated as a lesser crime than other rapes in many instances, and argue that further changes to these laws are necessary.

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