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Break-a-Norm

Our world is socially constructed, and within the confines we create are what is deemed acceptable to do or say. The daily interactions and experiences had and shared between people mold these boundaries, forming *social facts*, which generally encompass all the values, rules, expectations, and beliefs that make up society (Griffiths & Keirns, 2015). More specifically, social *norms*, are the usually invisible standards within society or a social group that define how to act in a correct, good, or acceptable manner. Further, norms can be either formal, in that they are well established and publicly agreed upon laws with consequences that may be enforced, or informal in which the rules are typically learned through observation and are casual and much less explicit (Griffiths & Keirns, 2015).

For instance, in our westernized society in the United States, an informal social norm that we barely pay piece of mind to is the manner in which we walk. When there is a busy flow of people going both directions on a walking path, it is typical for people to stick to the right side, rather than the left, in the interest of cohesion (regulating the traffic flow of people ensures less congestion) and respect of others' space. This widely accepted convention most likely is supported by the fact that we, as Americans, are required by law to drive to the right of the double yellow line on the road. So, in order to explore what happens when this norm is broken, I decided to break this unwritten rule by walking on the left against the directional flow of people

in multiple settings to observe the reactions from others and consider my own thoughts and feelings while involved in this experiment.

Observation

To analyze the effects of how breaking a specific social norm can differ, I performed my experiment in varying settings. I meaningfully designed the experiment's varying settings so that there would be a possibility of contrasting reactions among the target audiences. First, I chose to walk against the crowd in the Liberal Arts Building around eleven in the morning on a Tuesday. Classes were in the midst of transfer, so the halls were packed full of students eager to get to wherever they may have been headed. Some students exhausted, clearly wanting to go back to their beds, and others with determination in their eyes, obviously motivated enough to put a pep in their step. This is important to highlight, as it shows that within the busy hall of students everyone has their own mindset and feelings, which further shapes the reactions that people may have in relation to someone violating a basic societal expectation. Also, it is to be noted that most individuals were unintentionally following this unwritten rule already, which naturally prevents too much congestion in the hall. Initially, this was my first time trying out the experiment, so I definitely felt very out of place, and I did not want to cause a disturbance to the people around me. In terms of what I observed from other people, honestly most people's reactions were minimal and subtle. Most people opted for the simple, yet adaptable route, in which they walked around me which allowed me to continue walking straight on. A lot of people had their eyes glued to their phones, so there were times they would barely notice me walking their direction until it was almost too late, in which case we would both awkwardly pass around each other at the last second, with a few quick "sorry's" or "excuse me's" thrown in there. There was one instance where a guy was walking past me, and he bumped shoulders with me after passive-

aggressively swerving around me. As for facial expressions, I did feel like more people were looking at me and making eye contact than usual.

In my second go of the experiment, I chose to observe people's reactions when I walked on the left side of the wide walking path that connects West Village to the rest of Towson's campus in the afternoon around two after I got out of class. In this setting, there were still a good amount of people walking, but because we were outside and had a larger path most people were farther apart unless they were with a group. There were only a few exceptions to people following this social norm, and people reacted about the same to them as they did to me. This was a bit different than the first setting, while walking outside most people seemed to expect me to move out of the way, which forced me to go around them as they showed they were not going to alter their path. Others would go around me and then continue. I did feel like I got some weird looks from people, especially when I felt like I was causing a bit of traffic congestion at some points when the path got more crowded. Otherwise, this setting proved to be the least eventful.

In the final phase of my experiment, I chose to observe how people would react to me walking on the left side of the sidewalk while walking up York Road into Uptown on a Thursday night around ten o'clock. The audience here were still students, but many of them intoxicated for the typical Thursday night festivities, meaning people were a lot more willing to speak their mind, as well as being clumsier. This also affected whether or not people themselves were following the unwritten rule of walking on the right side, as it was busy and the flow of people was chaotic and irregular. It turned out that people seemed to actually care the least about my walking behavior while walking on York Road, concerned with their own groups and conversations. However, there was an instance in which *another* guy bumped into me, this time harder than when I was in the campus hallway, and he did not even acknowledge that it had

happened. Lastly, I received a comment from someone during this trial, which was the only time during the entire experiment that someone to me directly responded to my unusual behavior. In a large group of people one person said something along the lines of “Ay, watch out/ watch it” and lifted their arms up and swerved around me, laughing to their friends as they walked away.

Analysis

All in all, a general theme that stuck out to me among all of my observations was the fact that it seemed like everyone was expecting *me* to be the one to move out of the way. This is probably because I was the one violating a social norm, therefore, most people expect that I be the one to also correct it. Performing this experiment made me feel nervous and uncomfortable which is a direct impact of just how pervasive this informal norm is in our daily lives. Also, a majority of people carried on without reacting, especially if I was not in their direct path. The people who were, and had to move around me, still paid little mind. This could be because although walking against the directional flow of people may be inconvenient or annoying, it does not disrupt the peace to an unendurable level. One point I would like to compare is the difference in density of people in the different settings. In the Liberal Arts building the halls were smaller and filled with more students, so when someone had to move around me, it was a bigger hassle and caused further congestion in the hall as everyone navigates around each other, causing more frustration, especially if someone was tired or simply not in good mood. When I was outside in both the day and night, people had more personal space, and further, they could see me coming towards them sooner, which gave them more time to take a wide path around me. I think more people expected me to move out of their way while outside versus inside because there is also more space.

This brings up the fact that many people were also glued to their phones as I was walking, which at times, caused a near accident between them and I. This could be relating to the factor of age in the audience, as it is stereotypically something that young adults do. People did make eye contact with me more than usual, however, it could have possibly been my own anxiety from doing the experiment that led me to skew my thoughts and believe more people's eyes were on me. Any exasperated sighs or exaggerated movements signaled to me that these people were frustrated with the norm violation. This type of interaction restores social order. When I was outside walking up York Road at night, the audience being made up of mostly drunk people was interesting, because although people seemed less bothered, they also were more willing to react in a bigger way due to their lack of inhibition, for example by actually saying something to me about moving out of the way. I think that people seemed less bothered because in this setting there is less structure and more chaos compared to the rigid and professional environment in an academic building during the day when people are trying to mind their business and adhere to their responsibility of attending class.

Finally, one major point in the experiment I wanted to focus on analyzing are the two guys who bumped shoulders with me. First of all, I think it is important to highlight that they were both men. Not because a woman could not have done the same, but because a man has the audacity to. Traditional gender socialization teaches girls to be small and boys to be assertive, which I believe played a role in why it was men who truly expected me to be the one to move out of the way until the absolute last second which resulted in accidental collision. It is interactions like these that reinforce the rigid roles we have in society, as well as specifically this social norm.

Conclusion

The reactions to my norm violation are significant, as it exemplifies a real-life instance of how people shape the world around them, continuing to reinforce the structure of our society through simple, daily interactions. People's reactions depended on more than one aspect, such as the location, time, and gender of the audience, as well as the cultural environment that the interaction takes place in. Although uncomfortable at times during this experiment myself, I found it gratifying to analyze people's reactions after, and I may in the future consider breaking a norm for the sake of social experiment solely for my own amusement.

TABLE 1	Experiment 1	Experiment 2	Experiment 3
<p>What did you do?</p>	<p>In my experiment, I walked on the left side of the path, against the natural flow of people walking to wherever they're headed.</p>		
<p>Where/when did you conduct the experiment</p>	<p>In the morning (around 11am), I walked on the left side of the crowded hallway in the Liberal Arts Building.</p>	<p>In the afternoon (around 2pm), I walked on the left side of the pathway outdoors that connects West Village to the rest of campus.</p>	<p>In the evening, (around 10pm), I walked on the left side of the sidewalk while walking up York Road to Uptown.</p>
<p>Observation: how did your audience react? Any facial expressions, comments, questions, etc?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The halls were very crowded as classes were in the midst of being let out. - Most people showed subtle to no reaction, swerving around me and continuing on. - One guy's shoulder bumped mine as he swerved past me. - I felt like people made eye contact more than usual, because they had to look up from their phones when I was in their way. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Most people expected me to move out of the way, causing last minute swerves. - People would go around and then continue back to their path. - I felt like I got a few weird looks from people. - Less crowded outside - Some instances I had to be the one to go around other people because they really weren't going to move unless we ran into each other. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - This one was interesting because it was a Thursday night and many people were out on the streets, some intoxicated. - The sidewalks were crowded, but the flow of people was much more chaotic and irregular, people following less norms. - A guy bumped into me sort of hard and didn't acknowledge it at all. - Someone in a group of people said something along the lines of, "Ay", and made a big gesture with their arms
<p>What were the unwritten rules?</p>	<p>In Western society, the social norm is typically to walk on the right side of the path when there is a flow of people going both directions.</p>		

References

Griffiths, H., Keirns, N. (2015). *Introduction to Sociology 2e*. OpenStax.