

# The Interplay of Social Identity and Norm Psychology in the Evolution of Human Groups

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## Abstract

People's attitudes towards social norms play a crucial role in understanding group behavior. Norm psychology accounts focus on processes of norm internalization that influence people's norm following attitudes but pay considerably less attention to social identity and group identification processes. Social identity theory studies group identity but works with a relatively thin and instrumental notion of social norms. We argue that to best understand both sets of phenomena, it is important to integrate the insights of both approaches. We highlight tensions between the two approaches and conflicting observations, and sketch the contours of an integrated account. We conclude with some observations on how a twofold account may contribute to studying the evolution of human groups and understanding behavior and social norms in complex societies.

## 1. Introduction

The label norm psychology was introduced to refer to the suite of psychological adaptations involved in humans' capacity to establish and enforce social norms and behave according to the social norms of their society (Chudek and Henrich 2011). The current paper evaluates the possibility that to adequately understand the psychological underpinnings of peoples' adherence to social norms, we must simultaneously take into account theories about social categorization and social identification. It is thus an attempt to integrate two hitherto separate scientific approaches to the unique features of human sociality.

Specifically, accounts of norm psychology have paid considerable attention to the notion of norm internalization and the role of norm internalization processes in shaping human behavior (Bicchieri 2016; Chudek and Henrich 2011; Gelfand 2018; Henrich 2015; Sripada and Stich 2006; Tomasello 2014; Wrong 1961). However, such accounts hardly ever address individuals' social identity and the way it affects group identification, as well as its impact on norm following behavior and attitudes. Group belonging and identification are, for the most part, taken as a given.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) was introduced to explain people's identification with social groups (Bicchieri, Muldoon, and Sontuoso 2018; Cancian 1975; Parsons 1951; Tajfel 1981; Turner et al. 1987). Subsequent work addressed how groups differ in their attitudes towards norms and norm-following, and how people systematically differ in their attitudes toward different sets of social norms and are more conformist or attached to some sets of norms more than to others. That said, as we will show, SIT applies a relatively narrow definition of

social norms, usually conceived as collective beliefs about appropriate behavior. Considered separately, work on norm psychology and SIT each portrays a partial picture of a single phenomenon; when considered together, they have the promise to provide a richer understanding of individuals' attitudes towards norms and the evolution of norm compliance. However, such an integration is not straightforward and may go against some of the assumptions underlying these separate scientific endeavors. Evaluating its prospects and suggesting a way forward is the aim of this paper.

Our discussion is organized as follows. In section 2, we briefly present Social Identity Theory and discuss the role social norms play in it. Section 3 surveys several accounts of norm psychology and points out a tension between norm psychology and SIT. Section 4 analyzes the differences between the two approaches and sketches the outlines of an account that combines insights from both norm psychology and SIT. Section 5 concludes with preliminary remarks about the implications of our arguments for understanding in-group and out-group interactions in complex social environments, such as contemporary multi-cultural societies, and possible implications for thinking about the evolution of human sociality.

## 2. The role of social norms in Social Identity Theory

In the second half of the 20th century, several competing theories of social norms emerged. The sociologist Talcott Parsons argued that people adhere to norms because they are internalized in childhood and henceforth operate as personal needs that people strive to satisfy (Parsons 1951). Social Identity Theory was developed in the early 1970s, primarily by the social psychologist Henri Tajfel and his colleagues. Their theoretical ideas were grounded in the minimal-group experimental paradigm. In these experiments, people seemed to immediately identify and establish in-group and out-group attitudes even towards random, meaningless, and temporary group assignments. Tajfel's student John Turner later connected this work to various cognitive factors that affect how people perceive group identity and social position (e.g., stereotyping) and determine behavior. In her book, *What are Norms?*, the sociologist and anthropologist Francesca Cancian differentiates between Parsons' approach (namely, the socialized actor theory) and social identity theory (Cancian 1975). According to the latter, norms are not internalized but are rather shared conceptions about the roles and ranks in the community. Cancian defines social norms as shared beliefs about which actions and attributes bring respect and approval (or disrespect and disapproval) (Cancian 1975, 6). She marshals anthropological evidence that supports the claim that individuals conform to social norms to validate their social identity without internalizing them. She does so in the book's last chapter by showing that people change their norms very quickly when they become members of other groups with different beliefs and norms. We will later argue that people's ability to quickly move between groups and social contexts is critical for understanding norm psychology. While on Parson's view norms are internalized as part of socialization and hence norm change is very slow, according to SIT, people change their norms when their social identity changes, and both can happen quickly.

Tajfel defined social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership." (Tajfel 1981, 255). He argued that

when people voluntarily categorize themselves as belonging to a specific group, they perceive themselves differently, and their self-conception changes.

Tajfel's doctoral student and the developer of Social Categorization Theory, the psychologist John Turner, made the distinction between *social identity*, which refers to self-definition in terms of group memberships, and *personal identity*, which refers to self-descriptions in terms of personal and idiosyncratic attributes (Turner et al. 1987).<sup>1</sup> According to Turner's interpersonal–intergroup continuum, social identity and personal identity are two distinct types of self-categorization (Turner and Reynolds 2012). However, as Bicchieri, Muldoon, and Sontuoso point out, the two levels often interact and influence each other, and hence the distinction between them must be taken only as an approximation (Bicchieri, Muldoon, and Sontuoso 2018).

Tajfel and Turner distinguished between three mental processes that occur when people classify others as belonging to their in-group or out-group: social categorization, social identity, and social comparison (Tajfel et al. 1979). By social categorization, they refer to the way people use social categories and assign themselves and others to a category they believe they belong to. After being socially categorized, people adopt the identity of the group they categorize themselves as belonging to and conform to the norms of the group. This mental process is dubbed social identity by Tajfel and Turner. The third mental process, which they called social comparison, refers to how people compare their own group with other groups in order to maintain a feeling of superiority over an out-group.

It is important to note that in social identity theory, group membership is not something exogenous, which is attached to the person, but rather an endogenous and vital part of the self. In contrast, while social norms play a significant role in SIT, they are often described solely as attributes of the group or as signals of social identification. Put differently, according to SIT, the motivation a person has to adhere to a certain social norm derives from a desire to validate his identity as a group member, and it does not involve internalization of that specific norm in the sense of personal psychological commitment to the content of the norm. Recent discussions about the role of social norms in explaining human behavior portray quite a different picture by shifting the focus to individuals' norm psychology. We now turn to a brief examination of these approaches.

### 3. Social norms and norm psychology

The notion of norm psychology was proposed to describe the psychological underpinnings of norm governed behavior (Chudek and Henrich 2011). According to their definition, norm psychology is a characteristic of individuals' psychology that describes their ability to

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that social identity theory (SIT) and social categorization theory (SCT) are two distinct theories, although both capture the socially embedded group-located properties of human beings. Given that SCT was developed by John Turner, and he was also the co-developer of SIT (together with Henri Tajfel), there are substantial similarities between the two approaches, and in order to appreciate what is distinctive about SCT, it is necessary to some degree to examine aspects of SIT. A detailed discussion on the origins of SCT can be found in (Turner 1996; Turner et al. 1987; Turner and Oakes 1997; Turner and Reynolds 2010). Having said that, the distinction between SIT and SCT is less relevant for the purpose of the current paper.

acquire, implement and participate in a norm-governed society. Other researchers have shared this general perspective (Bowles and Gintis 2011; Henrich 2015; Sripada and Stich 2006; Tomasello 2009, 2014).

A large number of theoretical and experimental studies employ diverse approaches to human's unique phenomenon of norm abidance, commitment, and enforcement; we will mention only a few. Each embraces a different definition of what social norms are or operationalizes them differently, but all of them build upon the somewhat vague concept of social norms. While they have different explanatory goals and methodological commitments, they all address social norms as having a central theoretical role yet do not pay much attention to the possible connection between social identity theory and norm psychology.

The developmental psychologist Michael Tomasello defines social norms as "socially agreed-upon and mutually known expectations bearing social force, monitored and enforced by third parties" (Tomasello 2009, 87) and suggests that we are genetically endowed with a predisposition for sociality that is shaped and developed through a process of socialization (Tomasello 2009, 2014). According to Tomasello, children's ability to learn, follow and enforce social norms "reflects not only humans' special sensitivity to social pressure of various kinds, but also a kind of group identity and social rationality" (Tomasello 2009, 44). If a person wants to be a member of a certain group, he must follow the group's norms (Tomasello 2014, 119). Tomasello refers to the roots of this process of commitment as "generalized normativity" that "ends up back at group identity" (Tomasello 2014, 119), in the sense that group identity is the driving force behind people's commitments.

The cultural psychologist Michele Gelfand views social norms as "rules for acceptable behavior" that hold groups together, "give us our identity," and "help us coordinate in unprecedented ways" (Gelfand 2018, 11). Gelfand presents evidence that individuals' norm-psychology is closely tied to their culture being tight or loose, where latitude or constraint in the cultural context affects the psychological characteristics of individuals (Gelfand et al. 2011; Gelfand 2018).

The philosopher Christina Bicchieri sees norm governed behavior through the more general framework of rational choice and defines a social norm as a "rule of behaviour such that individuals prefer to conform to it on condition that they believe that: (a) most people in their reference network conform to it (empirical expectation) and (b) that most people in their reference network believe they ought to conform to it (normative expectation)" (Bicchieri 2016, 35). Bicchieri defines sensitivity to a norm as the degree to which a person adheres to what the norm stands for (Bicchieri 2016, 165). It embodies one's personal reasons and inner motivations to comply with a norm and may be subject to change depending on one's sensitivity to pressure to conform or when new information emerges. Bicchieri claims that in cases of competing norms, people's norm following attitudes are shaped by their normative expectations as well as by the norms they perceive as reinforcing their identity. She illustrates this with the case of condom use by men in which norms of masculinity and norms of responsibility push in opposite directions. A person may justify his refusal to use condoms by deciding that "masculinity norms, which are shared, justified, and approved by his buddies, are more important to his identity" (Bicchieri 2016, 104).

According to Chudek and Henrich's account of norm psychology, which builds on work on groups in cultural evolution, mechanisms for sustaining cooperation and other norms operate within groups and affect inter-group competition, and this selects for psychological adaptations for norms (Chudek and Henrich 2011, 220). In turn, these psychological adaptations facilitate cooperation within the group and competition between groups. One of the components of norm psychology is the ability to acquire norms. In SIT, social identity is the basis of group behavior and underlies norm acquisition. According to Tajfel, the group provides its members with a positive social identity, in the sense that it makes the individual value the distinctiveness of his own group compared to other groups (Tajfel 1972). Group identification becomes a salient part of one's identity, and in order to secure and reinforce their social identity, individuals define themselves in terms of the group that they see themselves as belonging to by adopting and adhering to the group norms. Moreover, experiments show that as group identity becomes more salient and of intrinsic value, individuals tend to behave according to the group rules and exercise personal restraint in cases of conflict between group identity and personal identity (Bornstein and Ben-Yossef 1994; Kramer and Brewer 1984). The juxtaposition of norm psychology and SIT side by side gives rise to the question of what exactly is being internalized and when. On the one hand, norms are internalized to the point they become goals in themselves, comprising a significant part of an individual's identity. On the other hand, social identification processes render group identity an integral part of people's identity. That is not to say that processes of norm internalization are not part of SIT; they certainly are. However, in SIT, norm internalization processes do not receive the primacy that norm psychology accounts assign to them.

#### 4. Internalization

Intrinsic motivation refers to the fact that norms become goals in themselves or part of individuals' utility functions and motivate action regardless of other payoffs and sanctions (Bicchieri 2005; Gintis 2016; Henrich 2015, 223; Sripada and Stich 2006). The process of internalization refers to one possible explanation of how norms are acquired and come to play such a role. Processes of norm internalization begin in early childhood, and internalized norms become a significant part of a person's identity, making it extremely difficult to change an individual's internalized norms. Many theories of norm psychology maintain that individuals' attitudes towards social norms originate from such a process that leads to life-long commitments to specific social norms (Henrich 2015; Sripada and Stich 2006; Tomasello 2014; for historical and theoretical context, see also Gintis 2016; Durkheim 1968). Norm internalization helps people navigate the social landscape and reduces the costs associated with evaluating the costs and benefits of adhering to social norms. However, internalization implies less behavioral flexibility (Bicchieri 2005; Henrich 2015). It has been argued that natural selection built us to be norm internalizers and that internalized motivations help us avoid temptations to break the rules (Gavrilets 2020; Gavrilets and Richerson 2017; Gintis 2003, 2016; Henrich 2015, 232). We discuss the evolutionary assumptions supporting this in the final section.

Christina Bicchieri addresses the process of norm internalization as being related to the individual's process of the development of moral beliefs corresponding to societal standards (Bicchieri 2016, 32). Emotions like guilt then support the motivation to conform to these norms. However, Bicchieri also emphasizes that behavior is the outcome of rational decision making, in which internalized norms are but one factor affecting actors' decisions.

In contrast to these accounts of norm internalization, social identity theory suggests that people's motivation to adopt certain norms derives from their desire to confirm their social status within their group's social hierarchy. Norms are thus not irrevocably internalized; they readily and rapidly change with changes in group memberships, social status, and social context. According to Turner's social categorization theory, individuals undergo a process of norm internalization, but only after they define themselves as members of a distinct social category and learn or develop the category or group's appropriate and expected behaviors (Turner and Reynolds 2012). This happens through processes of depersonalization and self-stereotyping (Turner et al. 1987; Turner and Reynolds 2012, 408–9). Thus, norm internalization is affected by the degree to which individuals consider themselves to be members of the group. This description is significantly different from that of norm psychology accounts. Unlike norm psychology, in SIT the individual's attitude towards social norms is determined by her level of identification with the group. She follows norms not because she internalized them but because she wants to secure her social identity. In turn, her behavior according to her group's norms contributes to the process of norm internalization. According to norm psychology, the course of events is the opposite: the individual's attitude towards social norms is determined by norm internalization. Through the process of norm internalization, the individual acquires her status as an in-group member, not the other way around.

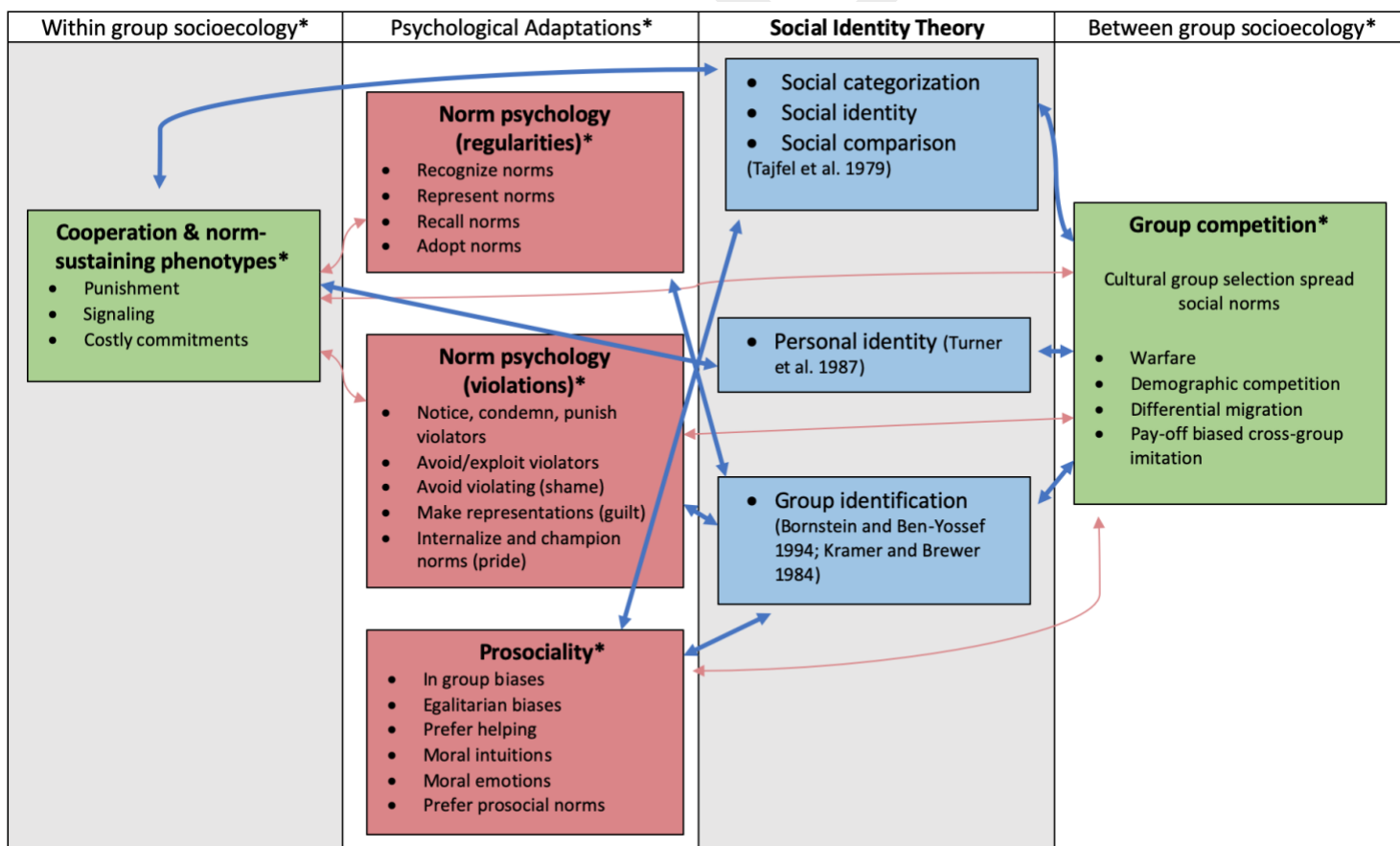
The two pictures offered by the two approaches are as follows. According to internalization views, the content of norms is acquired through internalization and rarely changes, and individuals are psychologically committed to the norms so acquired. Social behavior, in turn, is affected by a person's social norms as well as the specific social context that they find themselves in. According to a more dynamic picture suggested by SIT, the content of norms may be directly determined by the current social context. Moreover, social behavior may change the content of norms and psychological commitments. While sophisticated internalization views provide explanations of how and when behavior may go against a person's norms (for example, because of expectations about the behavior of others), they pay little attention to how this change in behavior may affect individuals' commitments and to the psychological tension that can arise when commitments and behavior clash.

An interesting case, we suggest, involves the process of social identification. According to SIT, people change their norms or norms-following attitudes to protect their social status. Norm-governed behavior may be affected in different ways depending on whether a person judges the people around her as belonging to her in-group, her out-group, or her desired in/out-group. A change in social circumstances may affect her social status, and in order to maintain or improve her social position, she may adopt new behaviors and norms. According to SIT, the purpose of the change of norms is to validate social identity, and she will change them again if she feels that her social identity is threatened. The anthropologists Jean Ensminger and Joseph Henrich and their colleagues concluded from their rich studies

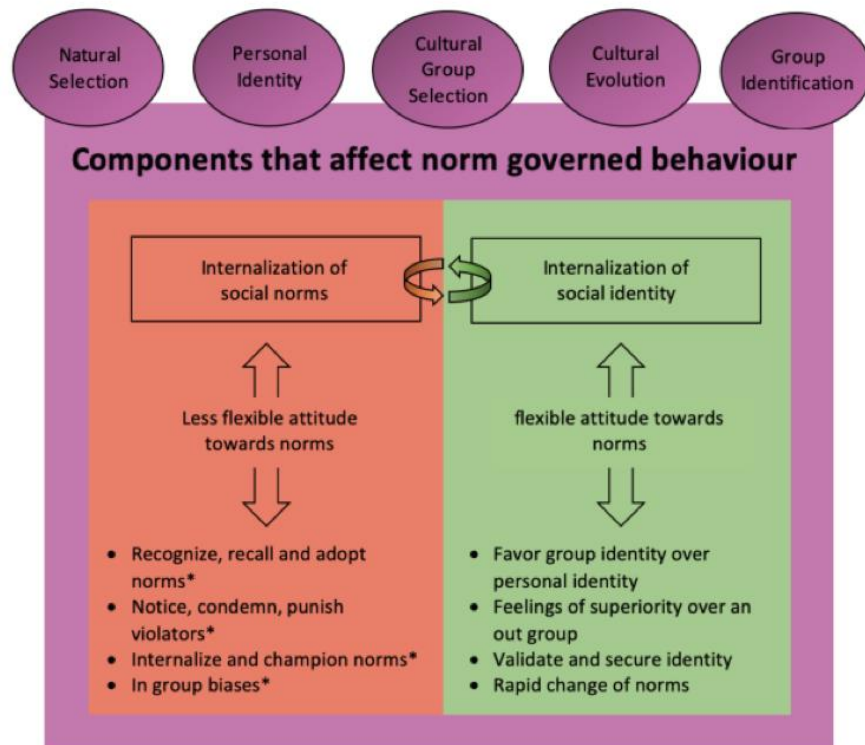


that people have many conflicting internalized goals and motivations, and they have to determine their behavior according to all (Henrich and Ensminger 2014, 58). Among those internalized goals, possibly high on the list, we suggest, are social identity and group identity.

To conclude, norm psychology accounts and SIT have different interpretations of humans' norm-following behavior. However, those interpretations are not mutually exclusive but complement each other. Addressing social identification processes as significant components of people's cognitive mechanisms that influence their attitudes towards social norms adds to the accounts of people's rapid change of norms offered by norm psychology. On the other hand, norm psychology approaches present a rich account of social norms and norm internalization processes that receive considerably less attention in SIT and situate the discussion within an evolutionary framework. SIT would be enhanced by addressing social norms as goals in themselves, to which people feel committed to some degree. Thus, people behave in accordance with their group norms since they internalize both social identity and social norms, and feel obligated to both (see figure 1 and figure 2).



**Figure 1.** Key connections between social identity theory and norm psychology. Red arrows are taken from Henrich & Chudek (2011), blue arrows represent social identification processes, and their direction represents their objects of impact. All entities marked with \* are taken from Henrich & Chudek (2011).



**Figure 2.** How processes of internalization of social identity and processes of internalization of social norms affect each other, and how both affect group behaviour. All entities marked with \* are taken from Henrich & Chudek (2011).

## 6. Concluding Remarks

This paper brings to the fore the possibility that an adequate account of human normative behavior must integrate insights from norm psychology and SIT. Each of the two approaches sets forth to explain humans' norm following attitudes and group-related behavior, and each addresses a specific aspect that the other one lacks. Norm psychology accounts focus on social norms and norm internalization processes, but they pay little attention to processes of social identification and their impact on individuals' commitments to their group, wherein norms allegedly come from. Conversely, social identity theory concentrates on group identification and social categorization processes. However, its analysis of social norms is mostly instrumental in the sense that social norms and adherence to social norms are merely indicators or signs of an individual's degree of commitment to the group rather than the result of his commitment to the content of specific norms. Moreover, it does not provide an evolutionary perspective on the origins of human norm psychology.

The sociologist John Finley Scott pointed out that "the term internalization is a metaphor: it implies that something moves from outside the mind or personality to a place inside it" (Scott 1971, 3). Combing insights from both approaches, we suggested that this metaphor can be unpacked by noting that it applies to two different factors: social norms and social identity, and argued that the *interplay* of both affects behavior.

Internalization of social norms and internalization of social identity can be seen as two complementary processes, both playing a role in norm-governed behavior. They both influence and shape the development of individual's attitudes towards norms and norm-following, as well as their feelings of commitment to their group. Furthermore, both do not



necessarily end after childhood but rather depend on complex social negotiation and movement between social groups.

One research area that may benefit from the integration urged in this paper is the evolution of human groups. Norm psychology is among the most important sets of mechanisms underlying human societies (Bowles and Gintis 2011; Gavrilets 2020; Gavrilets and Richerson 2017; Gintis 2003, 2016; Jordan et al. 2013; Richerson et al. 2016; Richerson and Henrich 2009; Zefferman 2014). Another crucial factor is the predisposition to impose social categories that produce group boundaries and identities (Jordan et al. 2013). We showed how these processes depend both on the factors studied under the heading of norm psychology and on factors studied under the heading of social identity theory – and, significantly, argued that the two issues are hard if not impossible to separate. Evolutionary accounts of norm psychology should address the interaction between social norms to social identity. This raises questions about the type of groups and intra-group organization within which norm psychology evolved (Jordan et al. 2013; Richerson et al. 2016; Richerson and Henrich 2009; Richerson and Boyd 2001; Townsend 2018). Multi-level societies composed of family units of close kin, extended families, foraging units, and other social units give rise to the possibility of shared social norms and social identities, as well as a whole range of degrees of conflict between people with overlapping but distinct norms and identities. Modern human hunter-gatherer societies are multi-level societies, and multi-level societies may have been typical for a long span of human evolution (Bird et al. 2019; Migliano et al. 2017; Tomasello 2019; Townsend 2018). An evolutionary result may have been the ability to coordinate and negotiate between norm systems, issues that are best understood by combining the insights of norm psychology and social identity theory. As we learn more about the variability and flexibility in social organization during human evolution, we may need to consider that these issues were important earlier than previously thought.

Another area that may benefit from the integration urged in this paper is the study of social complexity. Some theories define complex societies as those where groups are comprised of social roles (Kappeler et al. 2019; Rubenstein and Abbot 2017), and others view social complexity in terms of variations between and within social relationships (Aureli and Schino 2019). Our discussion suggests that a key factor for understanding normative behavior in complex societies with multiple roles, identities, allegiances, and subgroups (e.g., ethnicities, political affiliations, religions) which shift and change over time, is the negotiation of social identities. Such negotiation occurs both between individuals and within a single individual, harboring multiple, possibly conflicting, social identities and commitments. Observed social behavior and surveys of attitudes tell a lot about norms and attitudes toward norms in society (Gelfand 2018; Gelfand et al. 2011; Gelfand, Harrington, and Jackson 2017). However, normative behavior and attitudes towards norm following may also result from the complex interplay of norms with dynamic social identities and social contexts. This can lead to a mismatch between a society's degree of tightness and the degree of individuals' commitment to the norms of the groups they belong to or identify with. This may explain why a country with many conservative groups appears to be relatively loose or vice versa.

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