

# Rule-ish Patterns in the Psychology of Norms

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Perspectives on Psychological Science  
1–2

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DOI: 10.1177/17456916231187410

www.psychologicalscience.org/PPS



In “Rethinking Norm Psychology,” Cecilia Heyes offers an insightful critique of nativist approaches to the psychology of norms and then proposes a plausible alternative model grounded in the theory of cognitive gadgets. We are broadly sympathetic to both the critique and to the cognitive-gadgets model, though our own pluralistic approach to the psychology of norms (Westra & Andrews, 2022) leads us to think that the range of psychological and ecological processes that contributes to our norm psychology is even more diverse than what Heyes proposes.

Here, though, we focus on Heyes’s conceptual critique of the nativist model and its explanatory target—namely, a system for representing and processing rules. Heyes’s criticism of this representational rule-based conception of the psychology of norms is quite sound. However, we will argue that Heyes’s alternative behavioral explanandum for the psychology of norms also fails to escape the gravitational pull of a rule-based approach.

Understood in explicit, linguistic terms, the rule-based conception of norms is altogether familiar and unproblematic. But, as Heyes notes, the cognitive evolutionary approach is not committed to the thesis that this sort of representation underpins our norm psychology. Norms, it is widely agreed, are very often implicit, unarticulated, and unconscious. This, Heyes argues, is where the problems with the rule-based approach begin. Once a rule goes implicit, it is no longer clear what representations of rules consist of. Are they unconscious propositions inscribed in the language of thought? Or are they something else—an action-guiding model, perhaps (Birch, 2021), or high-value action representations acquired via model-free reinforcement processes (Colombo, 2014)? There are, it turns out, many cognitive processes that might produce normlike behaviors.

Unsatisfied with this vague explanatory target, Heyes offers an alternative: *normative behavior*. On this view, our norm psychology is understood as the set of psychological processes responsible for normative behavior. There are three types of normative behavior:

(a) *compliance*, (b) *enforcement*, and (c) *commentary*. This explanatory target has a number of virtues, but chief among them is the absence of prejudgment regarding what shape the psychology of norms will take. The notion of normative behavior leaves this question open while at the same time offering a concrete set of constructs designed to capture the common notion underlying norm-related constructs invoked in different disciplines.

Still, the specter of rules is hard to shake even in Heyes’s notion of normative behavior. This is because compliance, enforcement, and commentary are not, strictly speaking, behavioral. After all, what is compliance, if not compliance with a rule? What does one enforce, if not rules? What is normative commentary about, if not compliance with and violations of rules? What makes a behavior an instance of compliance, enforcement, and commentary, in other words, is its relation to rules. Instead of purging rules from the explanatory target of the psychology of norms, rules have simply filled in the negative space in Heyes’s definition of normative behavior.

It is not surprising that a purely behavioral conception of norms should prove so hard to articulate. If there is one thing that all norm psychologists agree on, it is that norms pervade all aspects of our lives. They govern the way we speak, the way we dress, the way we eat, the way we work, the way we raise our children, and the way we maintain our social relationships. As a result, the behaviors that enact compliance, enforcement, and commentary are nearly as varied as the entire range of human behavior itself. This is what makes the representational, rule-based approach so attractive: It allows the norm psychologist to posit a common causal factor amidst all this variety so that it all hangs together.

So, Heyes is right to steer away from representations of rules. But if a purely behavioral alternative is not the solution, what should take its place? The trick, we

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suggest, is to rethink the role of rules in the psychology of norms—not as an underlying psychological factor driving normative behavior, but as a rough explanatory construct that we as theorists deploy in order to characterize the phenomena we are interested in. The patterns of social behaviors norm theorists aim to explain are usefully described as though they are rule-governed. This should not be taken to imply that there are real rule-like structures in people’s heads: that is merely one of many potential explanations for how these rule-like patterns could arise. Rather, we should understand the rule-ish character of norms as an instance of what Dennett (1991) has called a *real pattern*—a preliminary, instrumental, pragmatic construct we use to characterize some class of interesting phenomena without making strong assumptions about their underlying psychological reality. The deep challenge in specifying the explanatory target for the psychology of norms, we suggest, is to find a more careful and rigorous way to talk about the patterns of social behavior that we as theorists are so apt to describe in rule-ish terms.

We will end this commentary by contrasting Heyes’s attempt to tackle this challenge with our own, which we ground in a construct that we call a *normative regularity* (Westra & Andrews, 2022). Normative regularities are defined as socially maintained patterns of conformity within a community; *social maintenance* is defined as any behavior by members of the community that incentivizes conformity and disincentivizes nonconformity. Unlike Heyes’s notion of normative behavior, which is framed at the level of the individual, normative regularities are specified at the level of a community. Normative regularities are also *interactive*: Normative regularities are distinguished from mere behavioral patterns by the causal role played by community members’ social-maintenance behaviors. This aligns somewhat with Heyes’s remark that different types of normative behaviors are related, with compliance distinguished by its responsiveness to enforcement. Our notion of

social maintenance would also encompass what Heyes calls “enforcement” and “commentary,” albeit alongside a much wider range of other behaviors that we see as involved in the maintenance of normative regularities (including, for example, practices of reconciliation and restorative justice).

We offer the notion of a normative regularity not as the final definition of the explanatory target of the psychology of norms, but rather to illustrate a different (and, we hope, complementary) way that this real pattern might be specified.

## Transparency

*Action Editor*: Daniel Kelly

*Editor*: Interim Editorial Panel

*Declaration of Conflicting Interests*

The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.

*Funding*

K. Andrews was supported by Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Insight Grant 435-2022-0749.

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