

# Socially interactive environment

Sociology



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I think that my slightly overweight friend would not top her beauty if she was slimmer; then why am I feeling the need to lose weight myself? I keep my mother's closet from 80's in the hopes that the fashion will recur someday; what stops me from putting them on today? In my opinion, getting married is not a wise decision if cohabitation is an option; but why do I feel like my relationship would be incomplete if I did not get married indeed? These questions may seem off topic and out of place; however, these are the mild side effects of engaging in social interactions.

In this essay, I will discuss more severe and malignant influences of society in our personal decisions. Having a social identity requires fitting into some social norms to an extent. Norms are, as described in the Macmillan English Dictionary, "standards of behavior that are accepted in a particular society" (p. 948). In other words, norms are unwritten laws of societies. What happens when an individual goes awry? My answer is, that individual gets into an internal conflict between personal norms and the norms of the society.

I will examine these struggles by using literature in my essay. Struggles of individuals and of societies always leak into literature; and so the struggle of complying with norms also did. From Brent Staples' recount of personal experiences in *Black Men and Public Space* as he was subjected to discrimination and racism, to Shirley Jackson's portrayal of Tessie Hutchinson as an outcast of the imaginary village in *The Lottery*, it is evident that writers also dealt with the struggle of complying with norms.

Conception of norms, and furthermore social identities, should also be referred to while discussing George Orwell's narration of the identity <https://assignbuster.com/socially-interactive-environment/>

struggles of a British police officer in Burma, and Ralph Wedgwood's depiction of the gay and lesbian society which gave a fight for gaining the right to participate in the institution of marriage in 1997. Looking at these examples, it can be concluded that norms are effective in every aspect of social life. From race to traditionalism, from ethnicity to gender issues, norms cannot be overlooked because they are major components of our actions.

Our decisions are affected by two major norms in our lives: our own norms and the norms of the society. When one is in a decision making process, these norms affect the decision in uneven proportions in different cases. Regarding social standings for example, like deciding on how to behave or what to say in public, the society's norms affect the decision more than one's own norms. A decision of this sort is made by the British police officer in Burma in George Orwell's short story Shooting an Elephant.

The officer, hated by the Burmese people of the British colony of Burma, gets obliged to making a decision in front of these people. The decision is between whether or not shooting a tame elephant which has no interest in getting any harm done before his sahib shows up to collect him. " I had no intention of shooting the elephant - I had merely sent for the rifle to defend myself if necessary" the officer says (Orwell, 1936). However, as he and the Burmese crowd behind him approaches the field where the elephant is pasturing, the expectation of the natives for seeing an elephant shot makes him uneasy.

Furthermore, he clearly states that to his own judgment, " it would be murder to shoot him"; but then again, he feels the power of the majority, the

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natives, on his actions: “ in reality I was only an absurd puppet pushed to and fro by the will of those yellow faces behind” (Orwell, 1936). Thus, there are two aspects to his decision: his own opinion and the expectancy of the natives. He feels uneasy, because he feels obliged to live up to the stereotype of the white man in the East. In the story, his internal conflict resolves with him shooting the elephant.

That is to say, he gives into what “ others” think, rather than sticking up to his own sight on the subject. On the way, he commits to an action which he describes as murder. The result proves that the expectancy of the society affected his decision more than his own opinion on the issue. Norms sometimes weigh more heavily than our own consciences while we make personal decisions. This is rather a sad but true deduction from this short story. Performing traditions is also an extension of following norms.

It is the “ it has always been this way” mentality of people that makes this a controversy. A simple example of this behavior can be seen in the experiment done on rhesus monkeys by primatologists in 1967 (Stephensen, p. 279-288). For the experiment purposes, five monkeys were put in a cage in which a ladder and a banana at the top of the ladder were present. Whenever a monkey attempted to climb the ladder, the others were sprayed with ice cold water. Shortly, the monkeys who attempted to climb the ladder started to get beaten up by the others.

Afterwards, the spraying process stopped and the monkeys in the cage were replaced one by one until there were five new monkeys left, and all of them got beaten up when they attempted for the ladder. At the end, none of them attempted to approach for the banana anymore. Although they were not

sprayed with cold water, they continued the punishment process nevertheless. Thus, they continued the tradition because as far as they knew, it has always been that way. Like monkey, like man. When Mr. Adams in *The Lottery* brings up the abandonment of the lottery in a dialogue with Old Man Warner, he gets a sharp answer back: "Pack of crazy fools. . . Nothing but trouble in that" (Jackson, 1948). To the villagers, it is unwise and dangerous to quit the lottery, which is a drastic tradition. Fear of change in a society prevents even the younger and marginal people from speaking up and behaving freely. Furthermore, when Tessie Hutchinson comes late to the ceremony, people criticize her for putting personal errands in front of tradition. This short story by Shirley Jackson is like a reflection of all the societies with norms. The ending of those whom are disrespectful to the traditions may well be similar to that of Tessie's.

Racial discrimination is a problem of stereotyping. Some stereotypes are subject to constant discrimination once likes of them are defined poorly in the imaginary social dictionary. Brent Staples is an example of this particular aspect of discrimination. As he emphasizes in his article *Black Man and Public Space*, "the youngish black man - a broad six feet two inches with a beard and billowing hair, both hands shoved into the pockets of a bulky military jacket" seemed menacing to pedestrians, as well as "policemen, doormen, bouncers, cabdrivers" (Staples, 1986).

To his pleasure, Brent Staples mentions that he likes to walk at night. However, his appearance forces him to get some precautions for seeming less threatening, for blending in. Wearing suits more often and whistling "bright, sunny selections from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*" are just examples of

the alterations he has done on himself (Staples, 1986). He mentions pausing before walking across the street for not frightening the pedestrians at the other side, or controlling his temper during the regular encounters with the policemen. In other words, Brent Staples alternates himself to break some stereotypes.

Sadly, he also alternates his social identity for acceptance from the New Yorkers. The last issue I will take on in this essay is the institution of marriage and the curious efforts of gay and lesbian couples to participate in this institution. It is quite interesting how homosexual couples, who deprive themselves from fitting into the norms, by being open about their relationships, want to get married. Engaging in heterosexual relationships and eventually marrying are the basic expectancies of societies once a member of that society is mature enough.

So, homosexual couples, who reject pretending like the majority by admitting their sexual orientation, still want to fit into the norms somehow. Ralph Wedgwood explains gay and lesbian society's wishes clearly: "Couples get married because they . . . want to get the rest of society to understand that they have a serious commitment to an intimate relationship. . . . It is the public recognition of the status of " married" that constitutes the most important benefit of marriage" (Wedgwood, 1997). They would not gain public respect by marriage, but they would gain public recognition and that worth fighting for.

It is curious to me because homosexual couples wanted to feel accepted by the society which does not respect their decisions on sexual orientation. They wanted to fit into some norms, if not all of them, in order to survive in <https://assignbuster.com/socially-interactive-environment/>

their social environments. All in all, I say that freedom of choice is fiction. A person either chooses most of the right paths in life, which are pre-determined by the majority in a society and set to stone by the norms, and have a peace of mind; or chooses unwisely and get spent socially, if not also economically, by the society.